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An Ambitious Girl; OR, She Would Be An Actress.

BY FRANCES HELEN DAVENPORT.

CHAPTER I.

ALONE IN THE WORLD.

THE blacksmith was dead; old Sabban Kuni-bell had gone to his long home, and his only child—his only living relative, as far as any of his neighbors knew—his daughter, the tall, the queenly, the blonde-haired girl, was all alone in the world.

The story of the blacksmith's life, since he had dwelt in the village, was a plain and uneventful one, for in these little secluded hamlets, where one day is but the pattern of the preceding one—where not once in a year does anything start-

ling happen—what was there in the quiet, hum-drum life of the honest workman worthy to be detailed at length?

He had an odd name—one, once heard, not easily forgotten—Sabban Kuni-bell; he was a stranger, a foreigner, apparently, who had come to the village and set up his smithy some eighteen years before the time of which we write. With him came his wife—a dark-eyed, apparently passionate woman, but very lady-like—and a little girl of wonderful beauty.

There was a mystery about the man; that point all agreed upon. He was a pretty good blacksmith, but a far better scholar; his household goods were few, his way of living plain, but he was evidently educated far above his present station, and had surely seen better days. His little library was the wonder of the village, for it contained books that some few of them had heard of, but had never seen.

The man was strangely reserved, too, in regard to his past life, for the gossips of Cold Snake did not hesitate, when they found he was not

inclined to be communicative, to ask him, bluntly, who and what he was, where he came from, for they surmised that he was an Englishman, although he never admitted it, nor what were the reasons why he had selected their village as an abiding-place. These questions the blacksmith pushed aside with the greatest ease, without satisfying the eager curiosity which had prompted them in one single particular, and he accomplished this task so nicely, and in such a gentlemanly way, that even the most persistent gossip could not take offense.

And the blacksmith's wife was equally as reserved as her husband, although she had a proud, imperious way of answering, which did not make friends for her; but, seemingly, she was far better pleased to keep away from her neighbors than to be on friendly terms with them.

Years passed on, and the village curiosity finally died away, as the fire dieth that is not supplied with fresh fuel.

The daughter—who, by the way, was as strangely named as her father, being called



THE GIRL LOOKED UP AND GAVE A LITTLE SCREAM WHEN SHE SAW A STRANGER WITH THE LANDLADY.

Years passed on, and the village curiosity finally died away, as the fire dieth that is not supplied with fresh fuel.

The daughter—who, by the way, was as strangely named as her father, being called Halah—grew to girlhood, freely acknowledged as the belle of the village; but she was, like her parents, shy and not disposed to make friends. She was no favorite among the other village girls, for they declared that she was a stuck-up thing, seeing that her father was only a common blacksmith. She was educated at home, and that tended, too, to keep her away from the rest, and so the girl grew up almost without a companion of her own age. When she was sixteen her mother died suddenly, and the cares of the household falling upon her when other girls were thinking of beaux and pleasuring, tended to withdraw her from the life that ordinarily falls to the lot of the village girl.

As a matter of course, being the prettiest girl for miles around, tall, stately, with a queen-like air, and the most beautiful dark blue eyes and golden hair imaginable, it was quite in the course of nature for every young fellow in the village to try for her smiles.

But, though very polite and ladylike to all, there was only one who could boast that he was even received on friendly terms by the blacksmith's queenly daughter, and this was young "Jim" Plumgate, the lawyer.

The Plumgates were an old New Jersey family, dating way back to the Revolution, and it had always been the boast of old Daniel Plumgate, Jim's father, when in his cups, that his ancestors always had been loyal to the Crown—Tories, in fact. It seems strange, in our time, that a man should glory in such a boast, but the old lawyer did.

The blacksmith was dead, and the blacksmith was buried; and now, two days after "earth to earth" had been consigned, the young lawyer made bold to call upon the friendless girl in order to learn what her plans were for the future.

All the gossips in the village had been predicting a match between the two, and now in the dusk of the evening when one of them, in passing down the street, happened to see the young lawyer knocking at the door of the blacksmith's humble abode, in great glee he hurried off to report the news.

The girl received the young man kindly, as was her wont, and the lawyer, with the briskness characteristic of the man, proceeded to the business upon which he had come.

"You will pardon this intrusion, I am sure, Miss Halah, when I explain what has brought me here," he said, as he accepted the proffered chair. "Of course, as you are well aware, I take a very great interest in your welfare, and now that this great sorrow has fallen upon you, I thought it was my duty to come and see what you propose to do in the future."

"You are very kind, indeed, and I am really glad you have come, for I stand in need of advice," the girl answered.

"If that is the case, it is very lucky I did call," the young lawyer remarked, his face brightening up; "but I can assure you it was with fear and trembling I knocked at the door, for—pardon the remark—you have such strange fancies sometimes, that I am always afraid of offending you."

Just a slight shade of color came into the pale face of the girl, and she hesitated a moment before she replied:

"I am not offended at the remark, for I know it is true. I have discouraged your visits, although I know you are really and truly a friend, for I did not wish to give the village gossips a chance to chatter. I am so sick of this miserable place; a young man and woman cannot speak to each other here, without the whole place is alive with reports that they are lovers—as if there was no other destiny in this world for a girl but to get married and settle down to a humdrum life!" and the proud lip of the girl curled in queenly contempt.

"Well, it is generally the aim and end of a young girl's life," the lawyer observed, not pleased with the way in which the girl spoke.

"Yes, but I am not like other girls, and I do not wish the world to talk of me in such a way. The world!" she cried, with a sudden burst of energy. "What am I talking about? This miserable little place is not the world, and what does it matter what is said here? To-morrow I am going away, and I trust I shall never see this place again."

"To-morrow?" The lawyer was astonished at the abrupt move.

"Yes, for good!"

"If it is not a secret, will you tell me where you are going, and what you propose to do?"

"I will; but I rely upon you not to disclose my intentions to any one."

"A lawyer never betrays his clients, you know."

"In a measure you are acquainted with my father's secret," the girl said, lowering her voice, as if the subject was a solemn and a sacred one.

"In a measure, yes; when my father died, he confided it to me," Plumgate replied, in the same guarded tone.

"For some reason my father lived in constant fear—"

"Yes, fear that his sojourn here would be discovered, and—"

"And what?" asked the girl, anxiously.

"That is all I know."

The girl drew a long breath, and a weary look came over her face.

"And that is all I know, too; I fancied that perhaps you had some clew."

"No, nothing; I know absolutely nothing but that he fled to this secluded spot, selecting it, as being far from a railroad, for a hiding-place, and that he was in daily dread of being discovered."

"And yet I cannot bring myself to think it was for any crime; my father was too good a man in every way to ever have wronged a human being. I have carefully examined all his private papers, which he kept in an old-fashioned mahogany box, but there isn't anything there to throw any light on the subject; there isn't a paper in the box which dates back of the time when he came to this place."

"But, did he say anything on his deathbed to clear up the mystery?"

"Not a word; he died in the night, and abruptly; no one was near; I was tired with watching, and had fallen asleep. When I awoke the blow had fallen."

"But the name your father bore; do you think that it was his right one?"

"Oh, yes; I am sure of it, for it is inscribed on the fly-leaf of all his old books, and some of them are dated twenty-five years ago."

"The mystery, then, whatever it was, evidently has died with him; but now, to return to yourself: what do you propose to do?"

"I shall take the stage to Freehold, to-morrow, and then the train to New York."

"But you do not know any one there?"

"I do not think I do," the girl answered, just a little trace of hesitation in her manner.

"And have you money enough to support you until you get something to do, for I presume that you are going to New York to look for a means of earning your own living?"

"Yes, I have nearly three hundred dollars, besides this house and lot, and I want you to try and let the house for me, all furnished as it is. Get what you can for it. It ought to rent for twelve dollars a month, and that will almost support me in the city, I think."

"Three dollars a week is very little to live on in New York. But, what do you think of doing, when you get there?"

"I am going on the stage; I intend to become an actress."

The young man was decidedly astonished at the calm reply.

"But, good heavens!" he exclaimed, "have you any idea of the difficulties that lie before you in such a life?"

"No, but I will conquer them, no matter what they are. I feel that I have genius for a stage-life—I have always thought so, ever since I was a child. I want but the opportunity, I am sure, to win the laurel crown."

The young lawyer uttered a deep sigh.

"Oh, Miss Halah, I am certain you will regret this step; you haven't any idea of the dangers which will beset you."

"I must meet and conquer them all; besides, I have an acquaintance, who has promised to aid me."

"I can guess who that is!" asserted Plumgate, suddenly remembering a piece of village gossip which had come to his ears only a few weeks before.

Again the faint blush stole into the cheeks of the girl.

"Oh, yes, I know; the story was all over the village. I happened to be in Freehold, and I went to a dramatic entertainment at the hall, and, after it was over, I became acquainted with one of the actors. He took me for a silly girl, and thought I wanted to flirt with him; I allowed him to walk with me; he was a gentleman, as I had thought, and he soon saw his error. I told him of the wish I had to become an actress, and he, like you, warned me of the dangers and difficulties which attend such a life; but when he found that I was resolute, he promised to do all he could for me. He saw

that I was no flighty girl, but a woman determined in my purpose."

"And do you go to him, in New York?" asked the lawyer.

"No, but to a lady whom he has recommended."

"Take care, take care! You have no idea of the many snares that exist to entangle a beautiful girl like yourself in the great city. There are people there, both male and female, worse and more merciless than wild beasts."

"I cannot bring myself to know what fear is," the girl answered, looking more queenly than ever as she spoke.

The young man had come with a certain purpose, and although from what the girl had said, he knew that he stood no chance at all of accomplishing what he sought, yet he could not help speaking.

"Miss Halah, you are a very strange girl, and therefore one cannot approach you like other young ladies; I have something very important to say, and I came this evening expressly to say it, but, hang me! if I know how to say it."

The girl looked at him a moment with her clear, keen eyes; then she rose and extended her hand to him.

"You had better leave it unsaid," she replied, frankly. "Let me go forth into the world and make my struggle; let me be cheered with the hope that I have at least one friend who will watch my career with interest—a friend to whom I have never given pain."

"But I may hope—"

"Without hope what is there to life?"

The decree was given, and Plumgate bowed his head in submission.

The next day the girl quitted the village, and in a very few hours New York, the great metropolis, swallowed her up.

CHAPTER II.

TWO ON THE SCENT.

THE full, round harvest moon was high in the heavens and threw its broad bright beams down over the quiet country, and by the aid of its light a well-dressed man with a florid face, bushy side-whiskers, after the English mutton-chop style, rather stout in build, was making his way to the little graveyard where the mortal remains of the blacksmith reposed.

The man had arrived in Cold Snake only about half an hour before, coming in a buggy drawn by a white horse, which the landlord of the hotel, where he stopped, at once recognized as belonging to one of the Freehold livery stables.

The stranger had a very smooth, persuasive sort of way with him. He alighted, remarked to the landlord that it was quite a chilly night for the time of year—it was early in September—took a glass of apple-jack, at which he made a wry face, as though he didn't like it, and then asked if there was any blacksmith in the neighborhood, as he was afraid one of his horse's shoes was loose and he had quite a distance to drive.

The landlord replied that the only blacksmith there was in the village, Kunibell, had, unfortunately, died a few days ago.

The stranger was at once struck by the name.

"Kunibell—Kunibell! Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, "I used to be very well acquainted with a man of that name, long years ago."

The tap-room loungers at once pricked up their ears at this.

"Yes, sir; I once knew a man by that name; not in this country, though, but across the water. He was not a blacksmith; his first name was Sabban."

Every soul within the room started and stared at this; was the mystery of the dead man coming out at last?

"Well now, sir, this I must say is a very odd thing," the landlord observed. In Southern Jersey the inhabitants have the strange fashion in talking of often substituting w for v, after the Cockney style.

"What is odd?" the stranger demanded.

"Why that is the name of our blacksmith, or he that was our smith."

"Sabban Kunibell?"

"The very same!"

"Good heavens! but it can't be possible! yet I haven't seen him for a great number of years—in fact had completely lost sight of him for the last twenty years, and I understood, too, that he came to this country, so it may be that it was my old friend, after all. He was rather tall, with light hair and no beard—"

"He had light hair, but a big beard," interrupted one of the bystanders.

"Ay, but he had no beard when he first came here, twenty odd years ago, maybe!" declared the landlord, in a tone of voice that brooked no

questioning. "Why, I remember just as if it was only yesterday; I had just taken possession of this old house then, and repainted the snake out yonder on the sign. I remember how he came into the village, just as well, he and his daughter—"

"Ah, yes, his daughter!" interposed the stranger, in his brisk, bustling way, "I remember her very well indeed, and a fine strapping young woman she must be now; let me see, her name was Hada."

There was a general chorus of dissent at this. "Oh no," the landlord hastened to say; "you have got the name wrong; it is Halah."

The stranger looked puzzled; he appeared to be much surprised.

"Well, it may be Halah, but I would have bet twenty to one that it was Hada."

"She never was called that, here."

And the rest all chimed in with the landlord in this, and the host took advantage of the stranger's surprise to get in a question.

"Begging your pardon, sir, what business was Mr. Kunibell in when you knew him?"

A well-affected look of surprise the man put on now, but it didn't deceive the villagers; for they were sure it was assumed.

"What business?" and then he pretended to think. "Bless my soul! it's very odd; I can't for the life of me remember; something in the commercial line, in the city, I believe; but, dash my buttons! if I remember. By the by, where is this young lady now? I should really like to call upon her, just to see if she is the daughter of my old friend, or not."

"She's gone away—went away this morning."

"Where to?"

"No one knows; she's a close-mouthed body, and never tells her business to nobody. To York though, I guess."

"Gone away for good?"

"Well, young Jim Plumgate, the lawyer, can tell you about that if any one can," the landlord believed. "I understand that she left her house in his care."

"I really feel interested, and I think I should like to see Mr. Plumgate. Where is he to be found?"

The desired information was volunteered and the stranger proceeded to interview the young lawyer.

Now young Plumgate, being a lawyer, was used to men of devious and slippery ways, and mistrusted the stranger from the start, but of course didn't let the other perceive this; on the contrary, he seemed to be overflowing with a desire to afford him information, though, unluckily, he was not possessed of much. Miss Halah, not Hada, as he informed the gentleman in answer to his pointed inquiry on this point, had gone away, but in regard to her destination he was ignorant; she had left her property in his charge and had said that she would write to him in regard to it.

"Well, I should very much like to see her," the stranger declared. "Here is my address in New York," and he penciled a few lines on a card, which he took from his pocket. "If you learn the lady's address drop me a line and I will be pleased to call upon her."

"Certainly," replied the other, but at the same time mentally making up his mind that he wouldn't do anything of the kind.

"Where is Mr. Kunibell buried?"

"In our village graveyard."

"If it is near at hand I shouldn't mind taking a look at the grave of my old acquaintance," and the stranger put on a melancholy expression, but the young lawyer understood the dodge at once.

"Thinks that he can get some information from the tombstone," Plumgate thought, but he directed the stranger which way to go and the man took his departure.

Straight to the graveyard then the seeker after information proceeded. Thanks to the bright light afforded by the moon there was no difficulty in finding the spot, and the plain slab which marked the resting-place of the blacksmith was easily discovered.

It was savage in its simplicity, and bore only the name of the dead man, and the date of his death.

"Sabban Kunibell!" the man muttered. "Well, there isn't much information to be got out of that."

"Not much," responded a hoarse voice, and a medium-sized man, dressed in a rather shabby black suit, and with a decidedly Jewish cast of features, rose from behind a neighboring tombstone, where he had evidently been concealed, and leered at the other.

"Bless my soul!" cried the Englishman, starting in astonishment, "if it isn't Jerry Kinlan!"

"Yes, gov'nor; your humble servant to command," and the man ducked his head and grinned again. "But I say, who would have thought it? Who would have thought of a cove like yourself coming away across the herring-pond on this 'ere lay?" and the man jerked his thumb, significantly, toward the tombstone that marked the blacksmith's grave as he spoke. "No, sir-ee, you could have knocked me down with a feather when I see'd you a-coming into this 'ere place, and I sed to myself, sed I, if it ain't Archibald Pasilwaite, I'm a son of a gun!"

For a moment the Englishman seemed perplexed. Had the unexpected appearance of the other disconcerted his plans?

"But, I say, gov'nor, the thing has gone up a tree here."

"You are in for this, eh?" the other asked, significantly.

"You had better believe it!"

"Of course you know the man is dead."

"Sartin. At first I reckoned that it was a 'plant' to throw anybody off the track, but there ain't any doubt of it. The gal is alive, though."

"Named—?" and Pasilwaite cast an inquiring glance at the other.

"Halah, they say round here, but Hada as we know it, and that's another thing that stumps me."

"Who are you acting for, in this matter?"

"Ax me no questions and I'll tell you no lies."

"Well, good-night to you; I wish you luck if you don't spoil my game."

"Same to you, gov'nor!"

And the two parted—both sleuthhounds, though of different breeds. It was a question which first should run the game to earth.

CHAPTER III.

THE THEATRICAL BOARDING-HOUSE.

The girl went straight to New York. Although she had always been brought up in the country, and had not been in the city three times in her life, yet there was nothing about her to denote the rustic, thanks to the excellent education which she had received from her parents, and the peculiar, though natural dignity which was so marked a trait of her nature.

She was, as we have said, a very beautiful girl—one who would have attracted attention anywhere, clad in almost any garb. The traveling-dress which she wore could not have been much more plainly made and yet with her stately carriage she looked like a queen in it; hardly a man passed who did not turn to take a second look at the charming young woman.

She had the direction given her by the young actor in her pocket-book, and when she arrived in New York, after leaving the depôt, she inquired of the first policeman she saw in regard to the street.

The officer directed and then, as she went on her way, took a good look after her.

"Bleecker street, near Crosby, eh? Blessed if a gal like that hadn't ought to go Fifth avenue way!" he remarked, sagely.

Miss Kunibell found the house easily enough; it was one of those old-fashioned brick mansions which, some fifty years ago, were all the style and occupied by the aristocracy; this was before the days of shoddy and Fifth avenue; but now, style and wealth have fled up-town, and Bleecker street has been surrendered to the vulgar and the "common" people, and to the demands of trade.

The lady ascended the broad stone steps and rung the bell. There was no doubt in her mind that she was at the right place, for a modest tin sign affixed to the side of the house read:

"BOARDING."

"S. MALLORY."

A sharp-faced, broad-shouldered woman, well along in years, but still right in her prime, answered the bell.

"Mrs. Mallory, please," said the girl.

The woman favored the visitor with a look as if she would read right through into her heart, and Halah, understanding that she was under inspection, bore it bravely, although a glint in her eyes indicated that she did not relish it.

The boarding-house keeper, for the woman was Mrs. Mallory in person, was somewhat surprised at the appearance of the caller, for she was decidedly different from the common run of fish that usually came to her net, but the impression made was a decidedly favorable one.

"I am Mrs. Mallory; what do you wish?"

"To see about getting board, if you please."

"Well, young lady, this is not a regular boarding-house—"

"I know it, madam; you keep what is termed a theatrical boarding-house, I believe."

"Yes, but are you on the stage?" and the look which she cast seemed to express a doubt.

"No, madam; but I expect to be."

Mrs. Mallory was surprised; she did not understand.

"I have come to New York with the idea of learning to be an actress."

The landlady gave a contemptuous sniff.

"Indeed, young lady, if you will take my advice you will go straight home to your folks and give up such a foolish idea."

"I cannot, madam; I have no folks; I am all alone in the world and must fight my own way as best I can."

"Of course you know your own circumstances best, but if you were a daughter of mine I should do all I could to keep you off the stage. I have a son who is an actor—a young man of talent, miss, but he will never make anything on the stage if he stays there until his head is gray."

"I am slightly acquainted with your son, madam, and it is through his directions that I came here."

A look, black as night, swept rapidly over the woman's face.

"You are acquainted with my son?" she snapped out.

Miss Kunibell realized that the boarding-house mistress was amazed and ruffled at the intelligence, yet couldn't possibly imagine why she should be.

"Yes, very slightly; I made his acquaintance this summer when he performed in Freehold—that is the town near which I lived. I informed him of my wish to become an actress, knowing that he being on the stage would be able to afford me some useful information."

"Humph!" ejaculated the other, in a tone which clearly indicated her disapproval of all these proceedings. "And what did he say? Advised you to go, of course, and turned your head with the silly story of how easy it is to jump on the stage and at one bound win fame and fortune. You have got a pretty face, and I presume that that pretty face made a fool of him, as a pretty face always does of a man, no matter how great the results may be of his folly!"

Now this was such very plain speaking that it was impossible for Halah to misunderstand it; but, though she was a country girl, she was quite equal to the occasion. She drew herself up proudly, and her face flushed.

"You are quite mistaken, madam; your son tried to persuade me *not* to attempt to become an actress. He said it was a hard, toilsome and disagreeable life, and that not one out of a thousand who followed it achieved distinction."

"A lottery with a thousand blanks to every one prize!" the woman added in her decided way.

"Yes, madam, so he stated; but, when he found that I was determined upon trying it, he gave me your address and advised me, if I ever did come to the city in pursuit of my Will-o'-the-Wisp, as he termed it, to come directly to your house; 'for,' as he said, 'while under my mother's roof she will take care that no harm comes to you.'"

"That is true enough, either from him or anybody else," the boarding-house keeper muttered, not at all mollified by the compliment. "Have you any baggage?"

"A large valise only; I am not very rich in worldly goods, but I have a little store of money that I have saved up for this venture, and I have a little property in the country which I rely upon to bring in a small income." Halah made this explanation, for she did not wish the boarding-house keeper to think that she came as a beggar.

"Well, I guess I can make room for you,"

Mrs. Mallory said, "although, if you take my advice, and you know what is good for yourself, you will get out of this city and go back to your country home as soon as possible."

"I must make the attempt, madam, and, after I have failed, then it will be time enough to think of something else."

The landlady had half-turned upon her heel as if to admit the applicant, and then, a sudden thought occurring to her, she faced around, a stern look upon her keen face.

"One question first, young lady, before you enter these doors, and I charge you, as you value your happiness and peace of mind in this world, to answer it truly: Are you in love with my son?"

The question was so abrupt, so entirely unexpected, that it took Miss Kunibell completely by surprise, and, for the moment, she knew not what to say. The question irritated her. With her mind fixed on the bright goal toward which

her anxious feet were pressing, what had she to do with love? Was the world all mad, that love seemed to run in the thoughts of every one she met?

Her face was an expressive one, and the experienced eyes of the woman easily, and correctly, read the thoughts that were passing in her mind.

"There, there; never mind answering!" Mrs. Mallory exclaimed. "I see that I was wrong in my suspicions, and I thank Heaven I was; never a foot inside this door would you have stepped if there had been anything between you two. I am glad of it, for I could hardly believe that Gordon would be base enough to ruin all your life, situated as he is, with a terrible curse hanging over—but, that is neither here nor there; his business is his business, and it is none of mine, so long as he keeps his troubles away from me. But, I say, young lady, don't you mind me," she added, noticing the look of wonder upon the fine face produced by these strange words. "I've got an odd way of talking sometimes, but you mustn't mind it; my bark is a great deal worse than my bite."

Then the woman led the way into the house and ushered the young lady into the parlor—the parlor which was furnished as boarding-house parlors have been furnished from time immemorial: a big-figured Brussels carpet, decidedly the worse for wear, four chairs and a sofa covered with hair-cloth, a small center-table, a large mirror between the windows, and an old-fashioned piano, which had evidently been extremely ill-used; a rocking-chair, too, corresponding with the rest of the furniture, was not missing, and this Mrs. Mallory proceeded to occupy, motioning the girl to one of the other chairs, and the antiquated piece of furniture protested with a series of agonizing squeaks against such usage when the girl sat upon it, for Miss Kunibell was good, solid flesh and bone, and no airy spirit.

"I don't think I can give you a room to yourself," Mrs. Mallory now remarked; "I am very full. Just now I have got six of the burlesque party who are playing at Niblo's Garden Theater, and a deal of trouble, they are, too, the hussies! but they pay well. A room with another lady will come cheaper, too, and I suppose you want to save all the money you can."

To Halah, who had always been used to her own neat little room in her country home, plainly, almost scantily furnished, it is true, but everything as neat as wax, the idea of sharing the apartment of an entire stranger was at first repugnant; but she had set out upon her purpose with a resolute mind, and was not one to hesitate at the first obstacle.

"You don't like the idea?" the mistress of the house queried. With her penetrating eyes she seemed to see everything.

"No, it is not agreeable, because I have always been used to having my own room, but of course I understand that I shall be obliged to accustom myself to a great many things that I am not used to, and the quicker I begin the better it will be for me, I suppose."

That is the sensible way to look at it," Mrs. Mallory asserted, with one of her peculiar sniffs, which she used indifferently to express either contempt or satisfaction. "If you were a rich young lady now, going off to boarding-school, you would be obliged to room with some one, and think it no hardship, either. Let me see, there's two young ladies who have room for another one in their apartments, Nellie Richmond and Sara Pearl. You and Richmond would never get on in the world, for she's a high-flyer, and a bad egg, too, unless I miss my guess, for she's got a temper that will bring her into mischief one of these days; but Sara is a nice, quiet piece, although she is as brisk as a bee; I think you and she will be very good friends after you get acquainted. I shall charge you five dollars a week if you room with Sara, but if you wanted a room to yourself it would be eight."

"Oh, I had better save the three dollars," Halah at once protested, prudent beyond her years.

"You are quite right, and Sara, too, will be of great assistance to you if you are determined to become an actress, for she is on the stage herself. She is very clever, they say; I don't know; I never go to theaters, although one might say that I get my bread out of them, which I do, at second-hand. The theater pays the actors and actresses, and they pay me. I keep a theatrical boarding-house, almost strictly, you know; very seldom have any one here who is not connected with the stage in some way, but I hate the whole thing, though!" the landlady cried, abruptly, with one of those sudden outbursts of fierceness which sounded so strangely. "If it hadn't been for the miserable

acting my boy would never have been afflicted—but there, that's nobody's business. Sara is at Niblo's Theater; she is one of the regular company, not like this little tiger-cat of a Richmond; she's only there for a few weeks, and the quicker she gets out of here the better. If she gets into any of her tantrums here I'll take and put her out neck and heels!" and Mrs. Mallory shut her teeth in a very significant way.

Strange ideas came into the young lady's mind. What sort of a girl was this one against whom the landlady made such a threat, and what strange associates was she doomed to encounter in her desire to become an actress?

"By the way, you haven't told me your name?" Mrs. Mallory added, in her sharp way, after quite a pause.

"Halah Kunibell."

The landlady knitted her heavy brows together.

"What an odd name! That is your own, sure enough; no one by choice would ever adopt such a one. Are you going to play under your own name, when you go on the stage?"

This was the first time the idea had ever occurred to the girl, and a sudden horror came over her at the bare idea of appearing before the public under her own proper name. Possibly the horror came from the dim, dark secret which had for so many years clouded her father's life. He had hidden himself away in the obscure village so that his very existence might remain unknown to all the world; should she, then, now that he was dead, and in the silent tomb, flaunt the family name in the face of all creation? Who could tell what the dark mystery was that clung so persistently to him? Might not some portion of it attach itself to her?

No! under his own true name her father had hidden himself away in the quiet of the obscure hamlet; under a false one she would bury herself and identity in the very midst of the big and bustling world, safe from any possibility of discovery.

"I do not think I will appear on the stage under my own name," she responded, after a brief pause.

"You are not ashamed of the stage, are you? because if you are, you ought not to go on. My son plays under his own name, and I have no patience with these people who think that they must have some fine, fancy name to act under. If anybody's name is an ill-looking one, and wouldn't read well on the bills, then I don't blame them for changing it. Bridget O'Flaherty of course doesn't sound as well as Beatrice Kingston, and one would never imagine Timothy Pecksniff playing Richard, Macbeth, or Romeo. Your name is not a good stage-name, and it would be better for you to change it. Turn Halah, which is the most outlandish name I think I ever heard, into Helen, and Kunibell into plain Bell—Helen Bell; there's a pretty, simple name for you, and it seems like a true name, also, and not an assumed one. Keep it all the time, too, in private life as well as public, and then, when you get through with the stage, you can drop it and go back to your own."

The advice was good, and the young girl made up her mind to be guided by it.

"It is not pride, madam, but there are family reasons, perhaps, which would render it better for me to take the name you suggest, rather than appear in public under my own, so, in the future, I will be known as Helen Bell."

"Family reasons, eh?" and the landlady indulged in another sniff. "Humph! you come of old stock, eh? I thought so when I heard your queer, outlandish name; rich relations, maybe, who may leave you something handsome one of these days if you don't disgrace the old family name, by dragging it in the mire of the stage. Well, it isn't any business of mine. Helen Bell is your name, and that is all I know about you, and mind, don't tell your true name to anybody, for if you do everybody will know it."

The girl kept her own counsel; of what good was it to tell the lady that, as far as she knew, she did not possess a single relative in the world?

"Now come up stairs and I will introduce you to Miss Sara; you will find her a very nice girl, indeed; very lively, but not a bit of harm in her; so different from that little fiend of a Richmond. I shall break that girl's neck before she gets out of this house, I am afraid."

Mrs. Mallory then conducted the lady upstairs. Up three flights they went, and then the landlady knocked at the door of the back room.

A young, fresh voice, with just a little sharpness in it, responded:

"Open locks, whoever knocks!"

"Just like her; always full of her mischief!" and the hard face of Mrs. Mallory softened in such a way that the girl understood that the inmate of the room was a most decided favorite of the rather irascible boarding-house keeper.

Mrs. Mallory opened the door, and, followed by her companion, entered the room.

Right in the center of the apartment, sitting flat upon the floor, in an old wrapper, terribly faded, and altogether much the worse for wear, with a great profusion of white fleecy skirts, liberally ornamented with gold and silver spangles, the typical dress always worn by the stage fairies, scattered all around her, evidently undergoing repairs, sat the inmate of the room. She was a rather tall, well-proportioned girl, with pleasant, regular features, a singularly clear red and white complexion, fine blue eyes and red hair, which curled in little crispy ringlets all over her shapely head. There was no mistaking the color of the hair—it was most decidedly and unmistakably red; not even the greatest flatterer could have called it auburn without blushing at the falsehood.

The girl gave a little scream, and with a single bound was on her feet, light and elastic as India rubber.

"Well, well, I am caught! Oh, Mrs. Mallory, how could you go for to come for to do so?" and she shook her head, reproachfully.

"Oh, this lady will excuse you, and she might as well get used to your madcap ways first as last, as I think of putting her in here to room with you, if you hav'n't any objection. This is Miss Helen Bell, Miss Sara Pearl."

The new Helen simply inclined her head, but Miss Pearl indulged in the most elaborate courtesy. The girl was so full of gay, animal spirits that she exaggerated everything.

"If you will give me your check I will have your valise sent for, and our rule here is that board must be paid in advance—"

"And no trust!" added the irrepressible Sara, winking slyly at the landlady.

"Not with you; I know you," responded Mrs. Mallory, tartly, a smile, hovering around the corners of her mouth.

She received the money from Miss Bell, as we shall hereafter call her to prevent confusion; also the check, and then retired.

The other girl had been examining the stranger critically, and, when the door closed behind Mrs. Mallory, she advanced to the other and offered her hand in the frankest manner.

"I am sure I shall like you; I am the awfulest girl you ever saw for taking likes and dislikes. It is either love like a house a-fire with me, or else I hate like all possessed. That is because I have got red hair, you know; all girls, and men, too, with red hair, need looking after! But, sit down, dear, and take your things off."

And Miss Pearl assisted the new-comer to lay aside her cloak and hat.

"One would never take you for an actress, with that quiet, statue-like face; but you're regular legitimate drama, I suppose—no burlesque or kick up your heels in a variety show for you," the girl rattled on. "When do you open, dear, and what theater? Maybe you are one of the new-fledged stars that are going to astonish the natives with a combination, this season?"

The girl smiled; there was something contagious in the brisk, cheery manner of the other.

"I am not an actress yet, but I hope to be one; I have come to New York to see if I could not learn to act."

"Good gracious! You don't say so? Well—"

But the girl's speech was abruptly cut short at this point by the sudden opening of the door, and a rather undersized, black-haired, black-eyed woman came darting into the apartment. She slammed the door to behind her, then whipped out a sharp-pointed, glittering dagger from her breast and flashed it before the face of the country girl.

"So you have come after him all the way to New York; but you sha'n't have him!" she cried. "I will cut your very heart out first!"

CHAPTER IV.

NELL RICHMOND

THE danger was so sudden, the attack so entirely unexpected that it seemed to transform the threatened girl into a statue.

Motionless she stood, and with great eyes, full of wonder, looked upon the threatening gestures of the intruder.

Not so with the other girl; she knew the intruder well enough, and had seen her in such humors before, therefore she was prompt to act.

Right by her side upon the bed lay one of the short policeman's clubs, such as are worn by the

New York guardians of the peace. This was part of the girl's stage equipment, and by mistake had been packed up and sent home with her wardrobe instead of being returned to the "property-room" of the theater where it belonged. The club came into service now, though, for Pearl snatched it up in a moment, and jumping to Miss Bell's side raised it in the air in menace.

"You, Nell Richmond, get out of my room with your crazy freaks!" she cried, angrily, and, from the expression upon her face, it was plain that she could be resolute when the occasion demanded. "You don't know this lady, and you have no business in here, and if you attempt to strike with that knife I will knock you down even if the blow does break that crazy head of yours!"

There was a crazy look in the woman's face and eyes, but for all that she had sense enough to know the chances were if she attempted any violence that Sara Pearl would be as good as her word, and as Sara was tall and powerfully built a blow from the stout locust club in her hands would be no light matter.

Slowly the black-haired, angry-faced woman dropped the hand that brandished the glittering knife.

"Oh, don't I know her! But I do, though!" she exclaimed, in a voice which was singularly low and sweet, though now it should be harsh with anger. "I saw her when she passed my room in the entry; the door happened to be ajar and I got a good look at her, and I recognized you, you innocent country girl! in a moment. I know what you come here for, but I shouldn't think you would have the boldness to come here openly. I don't dare do it and I have got the best right in the world, and yet he has got me tangled up in such a snare that I don't dare to say who and what I am!"

"Who are you talking about, or are you crazy?" Sara demanded, unable to make any sense out of this disjointed speech, and rightly judging from the expression upon the face of her room-mate that she also was completely in the dark.

"Oh, yes, I am crazy, of course. That is what he says, sometimes, and that is one of the threats which he holds over me. If I don't behave myself and do exactly as he says, he will put me in the lunatic asylum and keep me there until I learn to behave myself. And that is the way in which he will talk to you after he once gets you and then gets tired of you, as he will, as surely as the sun rises and sets!" she declared, with bitter accent, addressing her conversation directly to Miss Bell, who listened in utter and complete amazement. "But you will never have the hold on him that I have, and that was where, for once in my poor, wretched life, I was smart. I give you fair warning; don't you attempt to come between him and me! I found your picture in his possession, a nasty little tin-type, and I smashed it into a hundred pieces, and right before his face, too! That is the reason I knew you, for the picture was a good likeness."

"It is false!" cried Helen, indignantly. "I never gave my picture to a gentleman in all my life. I never had it taken but once!"

"Oh, he stole it, of course!" and the woman laughed, bitterly. "Of course, stole it—with your permission," she continued; "do you think that you can fool me with any such shallow trick? What are you doing here, if you have not come after him?"

There was a pause after this question; the country girl could not have answered it to save her life, for she had no idea what the woman meant, while Sara ran rapidly over in her mind the names of the male occupants of the house, seeking to discover which one of them was referred to, but the attempt was fruitless. There were only four gentlemen stopping in the house. Signor Brignoli, the Italian opera-singer, who was a big, fat German, of uncertain age, very much addicted to beer, tobacco and late hours; Thomas Stubbs, Stage Manager of Niblo's Garden Theater, a very elderly Englishman, as gray as a badger and as fierce as a hawk, and who had been engaged for so many years in blowing up "supes" (as the non-speaking actors are termed) and bectering unfortunate ballet-girls, more or less stupid, that it had become almost impossible for him to speak in a civil tone to any one; John Jones, stage-carpenter of the Olympic Theater—a wonderful mechanic, with a positive genius for devising stage machinery, a surly, dark-browed, sullen-faced man, who went about as if he had the weight of a dreadful secret on his mind, but who, in reality, was one of the most harmless and dullest (his own peculiar specialty excepted)

men in the world. Clearly then it wasn't the stage-carpenter, and the fourth man was just as unlikely to be the object upon whom the girl had placed her young affections as the rest—Jerome Skank, a scenic artist, a tall, thin, elderly gentleman—a living illustration of the old picture always used to typify the Bohemian; the man of the world, the child of genius who was not bound by the cold, conventional rules of society. He had long hair, sharp features, a red nose, and was extremely careless in his dress—a man of undoubted ability in his profession, but unfortunately so addicted to the use of strong liquors that he was not at all to be depended on, for when he took it into his head to go off on a spree, no considerations in the world restrained him.

Clearly no one of these four altogether unlikely men could be the one whom Nell Richmond supposed the girl to be in search of, for Sara had seen quite enough of the dark-eyed vixen to understand that the man to take her wayward fancy must be either young and handsome, or else, lacking these two things, as rich as a Russian prince.

"I know absolutely nothing of what you are talking about!" Miss Bell returned, indignantly. "You are a perfect stranger to me, and why you should attack me in this outrageous way is totally beyond my comprehension."

"Now, see here, Miss Richmond, this has gone quite far enough!" Sara interposed, her sturdy Vermont blood beginning to tingle in her veins. "I want you to understand distinctly that this is my apartment, and that I consider your room a great deal better than your company. Now, will you kindly retire, or shall I have to follow your example and forget that I am a lady and put you out by main force?"

And the girl, in her anger, drawing her really superb figure up to its full height, towered over the other.

Miss Richmond looked at her for a moment with flaming eyes, but the fire that flashed from the black ones—the wicked black eyes of the intruder, was fully returned by the gleam that came from the bright blue orbs of the actress.

Miss Pearl's blood was up, and if the intruder had dared to brave her, she would most certainly have forgotten everything but that she had the muscular strength to put the audacious Miss Richmond out of the room by main force, and surely she would have done it.

And the other knew it, too, for, after a moment's steady stare, with a contemptuous laugh, she half-turned upon her heel.

"You had better not lay your hands on me unless you are anxious to get hurt!" she warned. "I have no quarrel with you, but if you should attempt to put me out, it would cost you dear, and the chances are that the management of Niblo's would have to hunt up a new Stalacta for the 'Crook' to-night."

"Don't you flatter yourself!" Sara Pearl cried, with equal spirit. "If I did so far forget myself as to take hold of you, you little nasty thing! I'd fix you so that you wouldn't want to try to hurt anybody else, for some time."

Again the two exchanged angry looks, but the size and strength of Miss Pearl, as well as the temper she displayed, had a great effect upon the other.

"I may be able to pay you for this, some of these days, and until then I am very much afraid I will be obliged to remain your debtor," Miss Richmond remarked, with mock courtesy. It was astonishing how ladylike and pleasant the spitfire could be when she chose.

"I guess that debt won't trouble you any more than the rest which you owe all over the country, if reports speak true," Sara retorted, with biting sarcasm.

The shot struck home, and for a moment Nelly Richmond fairly trembled with passion; her eyes glared, her hands were clenched, and she seemed upon the point of springing upon her antagonist, but Miss Pearl presented a bold front; she was ready for the battle, and would not have been sorry if the other had attacked her, so angry was she, and so ready to teach the vixen the lesson which she so richly deserved.

The spasm of anger lasted but for a moment, however; the look in the clear blue eyes of Miss Pearl acted upon the angry girl as the steady gaze of the keeper does upon the half-tamed beasts in the circus cages.

For once Nell Richmond had met her master and she realized it.

"I've no quarrel with you," again she muttered, sullenly. "But as for you, you innocent country girl, I give you fair warning that if you cross my path you had better far have trod-

den upon the deadliest snake in this world, for sudden, instant death would be a welcome blessing compared to the misery I will inflict upon you. You are warned, remember! and blame me not if in the future I keep my word."

Then, as abruptly as she had entered, she quitted the apartment, closing the door behind her with a bang which roused the echoes of the house.

CHAPTER V.

SARA'S STORY.

"WELL, thank goodness that she is gone!" Sara exclaimed, in a tone of relief, throwing down the heavy locust club which she had kept tightly in her hand. "I didn't want to crack the skull of the crazy thing, but I would have done it in a moment, though, if she had tried to use that knife, although I s'pose it would have got all of us in the police court. You see, I know her, dear," she continued, seating herself in the rocking-chair; "I heard all about her capers and tricks a long time ago."

"Who is she? Is she an actress?" asked Miss Bell, resuming the chair from which she had arisen. And as she put the question an anxious look appeared upon her face, for to her mind such girls as the intruder were not desirable associates, and if she was an actress, perhaps the stage life was not all her fancy had painted it.

"Oh, no, dear; she is not an actress; she is on the variety stage; what is called a serio-comic—sings a song and dances between the verses," Sara replied. "She is at Niblo's Garden now, though, where I am, but only engaged for the run of the Black Crook. In the second act there are a lot of extra features introduced—dancers, singers and such like, and this girl is one of them. She's very clever, too, to give the Old Boy his due, and her act takes first rate with the audience. She gets a good salary, fifty dollars a week, and spends every cent of it before she earns it."

The country girl opened her eyes in astonishment. Fifty dollars a week seemed to her a bulous sum, almost.

Sara noticed the look and understood its meaning at once.

"Oh, she gets it!" she remarked, "and she is worth it, too, for she is very attractive—to the gentlemen; the ladies in the audience don't like her; she is too bold and forward. She gets fifty, but she claims to get a hundred; she don't, though, but there are some serio-comics who do command that figure. You know, on the stage, dear, the salary one gets is always kept a profound secret, and as a general rule always is augmented one-half. You get fifty, say, but you declare that you get a hundred, in order to keep up your value."

Miss Bell shook her head; she did not like the idea at all.

"That don't suit you, eh? Bless your innocent heart! you will find there are a great many things about the stage that will not be to your liking. And so you have come to New York expressly to learn to be an actress?"

"Yes, that is my intention."

"And what did your folks say?" Sara rattled on; "kicked up a terrible row about it, I suppose. Mine did; said that I was on the straight road to destruction, and all that sort of thing, but, like a willful horse, I took the bit between my teeth and I would have my own way."

"I have no folks, not a relative in all the wide world that I know of this moment," Miss Bell replied, a little touch of sadness in her tone.

"Well, you are lucky!" Sara exclaimed, in a very decided way; and then perceiving the look of surprise upon the face of the other, proceeded to explain: "I have good reason to say so, as you will own after you have heard my story. My father and mother died when I was a little girl. My father was a farmer up in Vermont and owned quite a large farm, but it wasn't paid for; there was a mortgage on it for quite a large sum of money; but, as the mortgage was held by my father's brother, my uncle, everybody thought it was all right, and father, even, when he was dying, confided me to uncle's care; and uncle was such a good man! He was a pillar of the church and had prayers in his house, morning, noon and night, and on Sunday he never could get religion enough. I used to wonder at it, first, little girl as I was, for my father was a good man in every sense of the word, but he never talked much about religion, either. I soon found out that the reason uncle had so much religion on Sunday was because he never had any at all during the week, but could lie and cheat as well as the greatest sinner in the world. You see his religion was all a fraud and he didn't have a bit

of the genuine article, which I believe is generally the case with those who make so much fuss about it. Well, this good uncle of mine managed to cheat me out of my farm. When the mortgage came due he foreclosed it and then his wife bought it in, and so when I came of age not one single cent of what my father had left was there for me; my uncle had contrived to make away with all of it, and, not content with this, he was anxious for the whole neighborhood to praise him for the careful manner in which he had brought up his brother's child! Mind you, he had made me work like a negro—worse, for I never knew a negro yet to hurt himself with hard work. I milked, and I churned; fed the pigs, cleaned the horses sometimes, and did all the chores that he could possibly find for me to do, and I lived on the fat of the land, all the time too, in a horn!" and the girl's indignation rose as she reflected upon the way in which she had been treated.

"Oh, my uncle lived splendidly; he was a good specimen of a kind of farmer that is altogether too plentiful. He was well off—his farm all paid for, well stocked, money in the bank and loaned out on mortgages, but he lived worse than the common day laborer in any of our big cities. It was salt pork from one end of the year to another. He sold everything he could that he raised on the place, fed what he couldn't sell to the stock, and what he couldn't sell and the stock wouldn't eat the family lived on. Oh, it was a splendid kind of life, and it is such a wonder to me that people run away from the farm and content themselves with city life!"

The country girl smiled; coming straight from the country herself she realized that the picture was a true one, for her father had often called her attention to the strange way in which some of their really well-to-do neighbors lived.

"Well, at a very early age I had made up my mind that such a life wouldn't do for me, and when I got to be a good-sized girl I had any quantity of young fellows coming after me, anxious to give me a chance to do housework for them, and take care of their children all the rest of my life for my board and clothes; but I had seen too many poor women go into untimely graves in trying to fill such a situation, and I told them promptly, right out, that it wouldn't do for Sarah; Sarah is my name, you know, Sarah Jane Perkins, and if you will go up in Vermont anywhere around the dead-and-alive city of Burlington you will find plenty of Perkinses, all relations of mine, and not one of them would give me a cent to save me from starving. I call myself Sara Pearl on the stage, you know, because it sounds a great deal better. No, I had made up my mind that I would not drudge my life away on a farm, the slave of some miserable wretch of a man, who would almost grudge me the food that I put into my mouth, and which I would earn ten times over. I had seen enough to know that there was a better life than that for a woman, and I was determined such a life to find. I was always an independent sort of a thing and generally spoke my mind pretty freely; so uncle and I didn't get on very well, for when he attempted to impose on me with any of his religious cant—it used to fairly make me sick to hear him talk religion, knowing what an utter old rascal he was—I generally expressed my opinion pretty plainly. He never would have stood it in the world, but would have turned me out, neck and crop, but I was saving him the wages of a girl, and, in fact, doing as much work as any two hired girls whom he could have got. We had ten cows, and I milked them regularly, night and morning, and made all the butter, fifty pounds a week about. And then, too, keeping me gave him a fine chance to blow his horn about taking care of his brother's orphan, and that he believed he would receive his pay for it in heaven as he was doing it out of pure charity; and all the while I was putting three or four dollars into his pocket every week."

"I can appreciate your position, for I have lived nearly all my life in a country village."

"I have lived all of my life that I am ever going to live in the country, unless I make a great hit some day as all us stage folks dream of; then if I made a few thousand dollars I might have a country place down by the sad sea waves to retire to during the hot months when not acting, so as to be in the fashion, but that is all of the country I care for."

"But to return to my yarn: I had made up my mind after I came to age and was my own mistress that I would avail myself of the first chance which offered to get out of the tread-

mill life I was leading. I had always had an idea of the stage, for at school, being naturally full of brass, I was always put forward to do the speaking, and then there was a little amateur dramatic society organized in the neighborhood; of course I was one of the bright and shining lights, much to my uncle's rage, for he said that I was going straight to the bottomless pit, but I laughed at him and he had to grin and bear it. By means of the stage I hoped to escape from the slave's life which I was leading. The chance which I had been expecting so long came at last. A regular dramatic troupe came to perform for a week in a village about four miles from our farm. I walked over and back every night, and the manager, who was not only the star of the concern but played the bass drum in the band outside and then took tickets at the door, scraped acquaintance with me, and, as I have said, being always awfully cheeky—you must excuse my plain expressions, my dear—I made no bones of telling him that I was dying to get on the stage. The troupe was a wee bit of a one, five men and two women, and he was glad to get a new recruit, particularly when he found that I was willing to go for five dollars a week and my expenses. Then, too, the Jack had fallen in love with me, and he thought, seeing that I was a simple, ignorant, innocent country girl—and country girls are always such innocent creatures, you know, my dear—that I would believe all he said. Well, to come to Hecuba, to use our stage saying, I 'sloped' by night from my uncle's hospitable roof and joined the troupe down at Rutland, the next day—no one of course in the neighborhood where I had lived having the remotest idea where I had gone, for in the note which I left behind me I was delightfully foggy. I wrote: 'Dear uncle, adieu; I go to seek my fortune in the city,' and that of course was my ultimate destination, but the note threw all pursuit off the track, for, thinking that I had gone to either New York or Boston, no attempt was made to trace me."

"Well, dear, I can't really say that I made a hit upon my first appearance, although I had quite a prominent part; in fact, dear, new beginners rarely make a success of it in their first attempt, except in novels, where the heroine, after everything else fails, always jumps on the stage and gains wealth galore at the very first bound, and these people that write such trash in regard to the stage generally know as much about it as they do of the interior of Africa or any other unexplored region. In some very rare cases people without experience have been successful, but not one in ten thousand who try it can boast of any such luck."

"It would take up too much time, dear, to tell you how I struggled along; and it wouldn't be very interesting either; but, one thing helped me as it will help you—I am going to speak very frankly to you, although I presume the idea will not be very palatable; I know it wasn't to me at first, 'cheeky' as I was, and determined to succeed: Nature had been kind to me both in form and face, as she has to you; I was an attractive girl, and men ran after me. The manager would never have dreamed of taking me if I had been an ugly girl; he fell in love with me—would have been glad to have married me if I would have had him; he was clever in his way—a very small way, though. I was not looking for a husband; I was dreaming of a glorious future on the stage, and so I laughed at his suit."

"We only played in the little bits of towns, barn-stormers, as we were termed, because in the old times of the drama the traveling troupes were glad to play in barns or anything else of that sort. Finally we burst up, as all the little troupes do, sooner or later. I had held on to my money. I had been with the company sixteen weeks and had saved up fifty dollars; had improved rapidly, too, so that I wasn't afraid to go on and play almost anything, or play at it, to use our theatrical term, and when the manager ran off with the receipts one night, and left us to our own resources, I came to New York, and I set out to personally interview every manager in the city; I was determined to get on if such a thing was possible. I commenced with Wallack, who is the leading theatrical manager of America, and I wound up with Joe Berlie, who runs a lager-beer garden with theatrical performances as an adjunct to the beer. And this last man gave me my New York opening at the magnificent salary of five dollars a week. I played in what is called a negro sketch; I was the landlady of an inn where some negro tramps, without money, sought accommodation. The part didn't amount to anything—wasn't even written out for me to

study, but the artists—Heaven save the mark!—told me certain things which I must say when they said certain other things, and for the rest, while they were all off the stage two or three times, I could say what I liked, and I did; I 'made up' as an old Yankee woman, and with my Vermont brogue I upset the negroes completely, so that the audience thought I was the star instead of them, and I made a hit. They were frightfully indignant, but the manager was delighted; he had agreed to give the two a hundred dollars for the week, but my success gave him a chance to say they were a failure; so he discharged them at once and put two ten-dollar-men on in their places. Then I got a chance in a burlesque to exhibit my fair proportions. It was awful at first to wear the short dress, but I got used to it, and then my star began to rise; so now, dear, I am the best Stalacta in the Crook in the country, and I am supposed to get a hundred dollars a week."

"I have never seen but one stage performance in my life," the country girl observed. "Uncle Tom's cabin was the play, but I have read a great deal about the stage."

"My dear, you can't tell anything about it at all by reading. In the first place, during the last ten years the stage has turned upside down; it isn't at all as it used to be. Once there was a distinct line between the Variety saloons—as the Music Halls are called—and the theaters, but now it is hard work to tell where one begins and the other ends. I suppose your idea is to play tragedy—Juliet, or Lady Macbeth, or something of that sort?"

"Yes, I have learned the part of Juliet."

"You will never get a chance to play it unless you hire a theater and try it at your own expense. You must commence at the foot of the ladder; I can get you a chance, probably; you will get about five dollars a week—enough to live on and that is all."

"And what will I have to do?"

"Nothing to speak of—go on and off, that's all, but you will get used to the footlights, and that is not such an easy matter as some people think; or you can try the managers as I did—then you will be satisfied."

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

NIGHT had come, and by this time the country girl had begun to get a little used to her position. She had debated at great length with the lively actress in regard to what was best to do, and the latter, seeing that her head was full of the idea, which she had got from reading about the stage, that it was easy to procure a chance to show the talent which she believed she had, advised her to consult the different managers at once, and then she would be satisfied. Sara "knew the ropes," and she was therefore well enough aware that a single day's experience would prove to the girl that getting on the stage was not such an easy thing as she had supposed.

But a great piece of luck had befallen our heroine right at the outset. In making the acquaintance of the actress, and enlisting her as a friend, she had builded better than she was aware. Sara, with that peculiar impulsiveness which was so strongly a part of her nature, had taken a great liking to the stranger, and already in her own mind had determined to help her along all she could. With the keen eyes of experience she had "taken stock" of the girl. "She is good-looking—more than good-looking, in fact," she observed to herself. "She is beautiful, and with a perfectly magnificent figure; a lady, too, very graceful, and ladylike, and evidently with a good education. There isn't the slightest reason in the world why she shouldn't make something on the stage, although it may not be the fortune she dreams of, and the quicker she commences to get used to what is before her the better."

And so, acting on this plan, the actress told Miss Bell that if she liked she could accompany her to the theater that evening. Of course the other eagerly accepted the offer.

"It isn't the easiest thing to get a stranger in behind the scenes," the actress announced, "for the rules are very strict and our old back-door-keeper is a regular griffin generally. If you were a man it couldn't be done, but as there are about a hundred girls in the piece, and it has only been running since Monday, it isn't possible that the old fellow has got all the faces down in his mind yet. If you have a waterproof you can put it on and come in with me, and he will not be apt to suspect that you are a stranger. I have a dressing-room all to myself, and from the landing you can look down on the

stage and get a pretty good idea of the show—it is all a show nowadays, you know. That term used to be applied to a circus, or something of that kind, but now everything is a show from the grand opera down to the learned pig."

And so, glad of the chance to gain admission behind the mystic scenes, the country girl went with the actress, and, as the latter had surmised, the old back-door-keeper never suspected that she was a stranger. He knew Miss Pearl well enough, for she had played at Niblo's before, and of course supposed that her companion, following her with such perfect composure, was one of the girls of the ballet.

Miss Bell passed the guardian of the portal without exciting any particular attention, but if she escaped his searching gaze, she was not so lucky in regard to another person who happened to be passing along the street just at the very moment when she entered the stage door of the theater. A very brilliant gaslight glowed at the stage door, and as one of the stage carpenters was passing out, just as the two ladies came to the door, they were compelled to halt for a moment until the man got out of the way; standing as they did right in the full glare of the light, their features were distinctly visible to all the passers-by, generally few and far between, for Crosby street is not much of a thoroughfare.

It was just one of those odd things which happen sometimes: A lady was passing up the street—a well-dressed, blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman, bearing a really wonderful resemblance to the country girl. She was older, though—a close observer would have said, considerably older; but the difference in ages could only be told by the absence of the youthful bloom which shone on the face of the would-be actress; this apart, she appeared about as young as the other.

Indeed, they looked enough alike to be sisters, or perhaps mother and daughter, although the stranger was hardly old enough for that.

She was richly dressed, looked every inch the lady, yet upon her face was a strange expression, an almost masculine look, and as she walked up the street she glanced furtively behind her every now and then as though afraid of being followed. This lady came by the back door of Niblo's Garden theater just as the two girls halted under the gaslight, and thus the faces of both were plainly revealed to her.

She started, then stopped and stared, drawing her breath hard as though laboring under great excitement.

The two girls passed into the building unconscious of the scrutiny. For a moment the stranger remained motionless, staring at the open doorway as though her eyes could penetrate through the darkness which reigned within; then, apparently actuated by a sudden impulse, she walked rapidly up to the old back-door-keeper, who, seated by the open door in his shirt-sleeves, was smoking a pipe in the most calm and serene manner possible.

"Who is that lady that just went in?" she demanded, in the quick, imperious tones of one who had been used to command.

The old man looked up, astonished at the question as well as by the tone in which it had been put, for this was a visitor something out of the common run—the usual haunters of the back door being dashing young men about town, anxious to scrape an acquaintance with some fair creature of the ballet, whom they had ogled with their opera-glasses from the front of the house; or a romantic and foolish school-girl "dying" to get a glimpse of some favorite actor or actress.

And, somehow, the old man felt inclined to answer the question, although, as a rule, he was rough and disagreeable enough. But in this case something seemed to tell him that it was no ordinary motive which impelled the question.

"That was Miss Pearl," he said, never thinking for a moment that the lady referred to the other girl, whom he took to be a member of the ballet—a person of no consequence whatever.

"Miss Pearl?" exclaimed the lady, reflectively; "the name is not familiar to me."

"Miss Sara Pearl, that is what she calls herself, but it may not be her true name, though; it's more than likely it ain't; these actresses, a good many of 'em, don't go by their own names."

It was a wonder the old man volunteered this information, for it was not like him to waste words upon anybody.

"Actress!" and then the lady looked up at the building in wonder, and the old man understood immediately that she had not the slightest idea of what purpose the building was used for.

"Yes, ma'am, this is Niblo's Garden theater, and the lady is one of the actresses engaged here."

"It cannot be, and yet—the resemblance is wonderful; but *she* is in England," the woman muttered, her mind evidently in a fog, and never taking the slightest notice of the old door guardian. "What am I saying? I have forgotten the lapse of years. The child would be a woman, too, and just about her age. I must see her; a few moments' conversation with her will solve all doubts."

She made a movement toward the door of the theater, and the old man, understanding that she intended to enter, immediately rose.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but it's ag'in' the rules," he said; "no one is allowed to go in without a pass, unless they are employed on the premises."

"Yes, yes, I understand!" the lady cried, impatiently, "but you must allow me to break the rules for once!" And out came her pocket-book which was completely stuffed with bills, and she attempted to force a two-dollar note into the hand of the door-keeper.

Now this offended the old fellow, for he prided himself upon his integrity.

"No, no, ma'am; that won't do!" he exclaimed, pushing the bill away. "I couldn't let you go in. If you will come at about eleven to-night, you will catch Miss Pearl as she goes home, but you can't go in!"

"I will go in, and stop me if you dare!" cried the woman, haughtily. She advanced a step, and there was a look in her eyes which fairly scared the man, although he was a pretty rough and tough customer, old as he was. "I will go in!" she repeated, fiercely; "stand out of the way or I will do you a mischief."

The door-keeper was astounded; never before in all his experience had he encountered such a woman.

"Go 'way, ma'am, or I'll call the police!" and he backed into the doorway.

The woman cast a rapid glance around her as if to see if there was anybody near, and there was—three men were approaching cautiously up the street. She saw them in a moment.

"I am tracked, then," she cried.

A carriage happened to be passing at the moment; it was a common coach, going along quite slowly, and the driver, a stupid-looking little Irishman, seemed half-asleep on the box.

With a single bound almost the woman leaped from where she had been standing to the box of the coach, then with a violent push she sent the driver headlong into the street, he being totally unprepared for such a thing, and she caught the reins from his hand as he fell, snatched the whip from the socket and applied it lustily to the backs of the horses who, astonished at the treatment, broke at once into a furious gallop, and up the street she went at headlong speed.

The three men, who had evidently been dogging her, were not altogether unprepared for such a movement, for they had a coach following behind them, and immediately jumped into it.

"Follow that coach! Ten dollars if you keep it in sight!" the leader of the three cried.

CHAPTER VII.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

TOTALLY unconscious of course of the strange scene being enacted on the outside of the theater, Sara conducted her companion to her dressing-room, which was an extremely diminutive apartment up two flights of stairs. The landing of each flight was so arranged that from it a view of the stage could be obtained—not a very good view, only a partial one, as the scenery was in the way.

"You see, dear," the actress explained, "you can stand right outside my door and get a pretty good view of what is going on, only it won't present the sight that it does from the front of the house, for you are behind the curtain and you can see the wires that move the puppets! Ah! it removes a great deal of the stage glamour to get behind the scenes."

They had entered the little dressing-room and Sara turned up the gaslights which just showed a glimmer of light only. She noticed the look of surprise which appeared on Miss Bell's face as she gazed around her.

The dressing-room was most meagerly furnished. Two rows of shelving were arranged around the walls; there was just an apology for a carpet upon the floor; in one corner was a common wash-stand with a pitcher and bowl; there were two chairs and a looking-glass, but nothing more.

"This doesn't look like the dressing-rooms you have read about, eh, where the actresses

receive the noble lords who come between the acts to compliment them upon their triumphs?" Sara observed, placing a chair for the other and beginning to remove her things.

"No, not much."

"Well, this is a pretty fair sample of what dressing-rooms generally are and what they all used to be in this country; England I don't know anything about. But now, when they build a theater they deign to remember there are some little insignificant things called actors and actresses connected with it, and they provide them with apartments that are a little better than the stall of a well kept horse. Why, I played in one opera house once, in a flourishing city on the banks of the Mississippi, not a thousand miles from Quincy, Illinois, where the architect actually forgot all about the dressing-rooms, until after the building was completed, and then, when it came to be opened, and the company had assembled, lo, and behold! there wasn't any place for them to dress! Something had to be done, of course; so some little cubby-holes, about as big as good-sized dog kennels, were arranged up in the flies—that is that platform overhead where the ropes are fastened. But they are getting wiser now, and in some of the new opera houses there are actually running water and steam-pipes in the dressing-rooms."

And as the actress chatted away she got out her dresses and began to disrobe.

The dress that Miss Pearl wore as Stalacta was a very peculiar one—in fact, it might be said to be no dress at all, and the color fairly came into the face of the country girl as she saw with horror what a liberal display of her well-proportioned form the actress made. Her nether limbs were incased in flesh-colored silk tights; her arms, which were really beautiful, being as white and as round as the arms of a chubby child, were bare nearly to the shoulders and all the dress she wore was a sort of a short-sleeved jacket-bodice, with a pair of short "trunks" which came down half-way between the thigh and the knee.

"Surely, you are not going on the stage before a multitude of people in that way?" Miss Bell exclaimed.

And the question was a natural one, for a dress more calculated to display the beauties of the female form divine the art of man could hardly have devised.

A quick flush came over the face of the actress for a moment, for she winced at the question; then she laughed, for long ago she had fought the battle with herself.

"Dear, I don't wonder at the question, for when I first went on the stage if anybody had even suggested that I would display my limbs in this way, I would have been horrified at the very idea, but I have got bravely over it. It has come to be a matter of business, and I think no more of it than the high-toned belles and matrons of society do when they go to public balls with dresses cut so low in the neck that they might as well, as far as decency is concerned, have on no waist at all. It is all a mere matter of custom. I get my bread this way; I cannot get it as well any other. I know it is not very nice, but it doesn't make any difference in me; when I am off the stage I know that I am just as good and modest a girl as I used to be in my Vermont home, before I ever stepped foot on the public boards. In fact, I am more modest, for then, whenever there were any parties in the neighborhood, kissing games were always played, and I have been kissed twenty times in a night by twenty different boys, and pretty well towzled about, too, in the bargain, and no one thought that there was any harm in it because it was the custom, but I would like to catch anybody trying anything of that kind now!" Her eyes flashed, and she drew her tall figure up as she spoke until she looked like a very queen.

"I know I never could do it!" the country girl declared; "and if I must do it, I may as well give up all thoughts of becoming an actress!"

"Oh, no; that isn't necessary. This is only one line; there are three or four others, where you won't have to exhibit yourself quite so much. But, at the best, remember that to act is to make a *show* of yourself; you can't dodge that fact; and any one who pays the money to come in has the right to stare at you all he, or she, pleases. To a certain degree, the moment a man or woman steps foot upon the stage, it is to become public property. And you must remember, too, that a certain part of the world—quite a large number of people—believes that there isn't such a thing as a good man or woman upon the stage. You will find that belief pretty strong, and that is another thing you

will have to submit to. I tell you what it is, dear, the woman who wins the laurel crown upon the stage has to pay pretty dearly for it. But, you will see in time. Try the regular acting; go in for a tragedy queen; you may succeed; others have done it, although I failed. But, there is one thing in regard to this costume which I must explain to you. I don't suppose you will understand it; few do until they have been years in the profession, and have got used to it; and that is, when we are on the stage we are not thinking of the audience at all—we are thinking of our parts—how soon we will get home—how much money there is in the house, and, sometimes, whether we are going to get our salary or not. We never think of our dress, whether the audience are staring at us or not. We take it for granted that they are, of course; that is what they paid their money for. You will understand this feeling when you get before the footlights in good earnest."

The call-boy's shrill yell:

"Last music! Overture on, and everybody down to begin!" echoing through the entry without, put a stop to the conversation just then, and Sara, bestowing the last hasty touches to her toilet, prepared to descend to the stage.

"You can stand on the landing without," she said; "I don't think anybody will notice you, but, if they do, tell them that you came to dress me; then they will think that I am trying to put on airs like these French and Italian danseuses who bring a whole family to wait upon them."

Then Sara descended to the stage, and Miss Bell took a position upon the landing. Everything, of course, was new and strange to her. The curtain would soon rise, and all was now bustle and confusion upon the stage. Stubbs, the stage-manager, whom she recognized at once, having been introduced to him at the boarding-house at supper-time, was raging around the stage like a madman. He was a fine specimen of the old-time stage-manager, who in order to make his authority respected, thought it necessary to swear at everybody and everything.

The orchestra outside were playing away for dear life, and the hum and bustle of the audience crowding into the house could be distinctly heard above the music—the gallery gods, as the occupants of the upper circle are usually termed, in particular, rushing into their places like a herd of buffaloes.

The stage was full of carpenters in their shirt sleeves, fairies in short skirts, demons in horrid array, and all the motley characters that go to make up the Black Crook—the greatest spectacular play the stage has ever seen.

Suddenly, with a flourish, the overture ended. Then there was the tinkle of a bell.

"Clear!" yelled the stage-manager, and, as if by magic, the stage was vacated by all not concerned in the beginning, and the curtain rose.

Three wonderful hours of sight-seeing our heroine then had.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW YORK MANAGERS.

AFTER the performance ended, Sara doffed the light, airy robes of the fairy queen, and once more assumed the prosaic garb of civilized life, then the two girls proceeded homeward.

"Well, dear, I have commenced to pull the wires for you, already," Sara announced, as they walked along. "Old Stubbs took a fancy to you to-night at the supper-table; it was a wonder, too, for I never knew the crusty old rat to take a fancy to any one before."

The appellation bestowed upon the veteran stage-director fitted him well, for, with his shaggy gray hair and whiskers, and his sharp, peaked features, he looked more like a rat almost than a human.

"I am glad to hear it."

"He's a valuable friend to have, for he is one of the oldest men in the business, and managers attach a great deal of weight to anything he says. Yes, he wanted to know who you were, if you were a professional, for he said that you had a good face and figure, and looked as if you could do something. I rather evaded the question, and, although I didn't tell a downright fib, I came pretty near to it. I said that I believed you hadn't had much practice. He caught sight of you at the theater to-night, and remarked again that you had a face which would light up well. You see, the stage-managers calculate in regard to our personal attractions a good deal as if we were a lot of horses or dogs."

"Yes, how different from the life which I imagined it to be," the country girl confessed, with a sigh. Already some of the illusion was vanishing.

"And he said, too, that he guessed he could make room for you next week if you didn't want too much money."

"What does he want me to do?"

"I don't know that; the conversation was interrupted just then, but he will probably tell me the next chance he gets."

The golden opportunity which she so earnestly desired seemed near at hand now, but the girl rather shrunk from it; from Shakespeare's Juliet to figuring in the Black Crook was such a terrible fall.

But, she was to call upon the manager tomorrow; perhaps there might be something better in store for her.

Restless was the night she passed; ugly dreams haunted her pillow, but her companion—who, after all, with all her intelligence and good sense, had a great deal of the animal in her—slept like a log, tired out after her night's work.

After breakfast in the morning, about nine o'clock Miss Bell set out upon her mission. Sara had directed her to call upon one of the up-town theater managers whose especial pride it was that he had introduced to public notice some actresses who had succeeded in pleasing the public.

"I made them, sir," he was wont to declare in the lofty and dignified tone which he thought necessary to his position. "They had some little talent to begin with, I grant you, but without the aid and instruction which they received from me they wouldn't have amounted to anything." And, to give the actresses due credit, they spoke of their former manager exactly as he spoke of them; it was *their* talent which had made *him*; he was "rather clever," but without their services what would *he* have done?

This gentleman received our heroine in the most dignified manner. If he had been President of the Republic and she a begging office-seeker, he could not have been more formally polite.

In a few words she made known her mission.

He shook his head.

"No experience at all?"

She was obliged to confess that she had not.

"No chance at all for you, miss; you had better give up the idea for the present. Go and study; acting is an art which must be acquired. Natural genius is something, of course, but it is absolutely nothing when compared to years of careful study. Get a competent teacher; study for two or three years, then make a *début* somewhere, and if you are successful, and you think you are destined for the stage, then come to me; I can always make a vacancy for talent, well instructed. Very low salary of course—in fact, as a rule, all the ladies who enter my theater do not ask any salary for the first season, for the stamp of my theater insures their ultimate success."

Our country girl was not deceived; she felt assured that the man was an arrant charlatan, and had a great mind to ask him how a woman was going to live upon nothing for a whole year. She resisted the impulse, though, and allowed herself to be politely bowed out.

The next manager she called upon had a pretty little theater a short distance up the street.

He was a rather undersized, sharp-faced man, with red hair and whiskers, and the peculiar sharp look common to Hebrews the world over.

He was very civil, and very polite—quite a contrast to the pompous dignity of the other, and being by nature, too, a great ladies' man, he was at once impressed by the personal appearance of his visitor.

When she had made known her business, he caressed his chin and meditated for a moment.

"Let me see," he said, reflectively; "I really don't see any chance for you at present. I do not run a stock company now; I merely let my theater to combinations or play them on shares; but I have an open week now and then, and we might arrange something, for I must say, miss, from your appearance, and the manner in which you speak, you impress me with an idea that you have talent. Are you up in any character?"

"I have studied Juliet, sir."

"Capital!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically; "you couldn't have done better! Romeo used to be a favorite part of mine, and I should be happy to play Romeo to such a divine Juliet as I am sure you would make."

He intended this for a compliment, out, instead of pleasing, it alarmed the girl, for she did not like the way in which it was spoken.

"But I am out of harness now," he continued; "I haven't played for years; the cares of management prevent me from giving any attention to acting. Let me see! in about a month I

shall have an open week, and I was just speculating what I should put in. Now, if you would like that week I think we can make an arrangement. I will give you the theater heated and lighted, with the attaches, before and behind the curtain, all complete and ready for business, for a thousand dollars."

The girl looked at him, perplexed; she did not exactly understand this offer.

"Then you will have to find your company, you know, and the music, and the newspaper advertising, the printing, bill-posting, etc.; you can get them all for about two thousand, so you can safely count that your expenses for the week will not exceed three thousand dollars. My theater will hold about a thousand to twelve hundred dollars, and there are eight performances in the week, you know, six nights and two matinees. Eight performances, supposing that you took a thousand dollars a performance, would amount to eight thousand dollars; that would be five thousand dollars profit on the week; but you could hardly hope to do as well as that, being comparatively unknown, unless, indeed, you should succeed in making a great hit the first night. Such things have been known, you know; but, to be on the safe side, we will say that you will play to an average business of one-half the capacity of the house—say five hundred per night. That would be four thousand dollars for the week—a thousand dollars profit and the glory of an opening in one of the most popular theaters in the metropolis. If you were successful, both fame and fortune would be within your grasp."

It was an alluring picture, truly, but our country girl had entirely too much sense to be dazzled by it; besides, where on earth was she to get the three thousand dollars? and so she immediately replied that she had not that amount of money at command.

"Oh, you don't need it all," the manager reassured; "one-half of it, fifteen hundred dollars, will be enough to carry you through. There is the thousand dollars for the theater—that is *always* paid when the contract is signed, then five hundred more for advertising, etc., and the rest you can pay out of the receipts of the house when it comes."

Of course the girl was not well enough acquainted with the theatrical business—which is one of the strangest and oddest *trades* in the world—to know that such a thing was possible as to open a New York theater and not take twenty-five dollars a night, instead of five hundred, but she was afraid of the venture, and so informed the manager; and when that acute gentleman found there wasn't any chance of getting a thousand dollars out of his visitor for a theater which only stood him six hundred a week, he proceeded to get rid of her as soon as possible.

It is hardly worth while to detail the lady's further adventures in her quest for a manager who was willing to give her a chance to show what she could do. The result was an utter, total failure. The manager whom she had in her mind's eye, eager to discover and encourage native talent, existed not; or, at all events, he was not controlling a city theater at present.

Heartsick and discouraged, she returned to the boarding-house, and Sara listened with interest to her story.

"What did I tell you?" she exclaimed. "I knew how it would be before you started. Managers run theaters to make money, and there isn't much in novices. My dear, you will have to come to Niblo's."

CHAPTER IX.

HARE AND HOUNDS.

TEN dollars were not to be picked up at every corner, so the announcement that it would be ten dollars in his pocket if he overtook the fleeing coach inspired the driver of the second vehicle to use the lash on his horses; but the woman, having the start of the few moments lost by her pursuers at the outset, whirled around the corner into Houston street.

The man who had offered the ten dollars was a tall, stout gentleman, well-advanced in years, yet well-preserved—a man of position and standing evidently, for his companions usually addressed him as "Professor," though sometimes they called him Mr. McDonald. The other two differed as widely in their appearance as they did from their companion. One was as black as a coal—a negro, so dark, that the saying that charcoal would make a white mark on him, seemed apt. The other was as full-blooded a Paddy-whack, as had ever greased a brogue or twirled a "nate black-thorn twig" in the Emerald Isle. Julius Ogletorpe the black was called, and the Irishman answered to the name of Dennis O'Toole.

"Upon me wourd!" the Irishman exclaimed, as the carriage jolted so violently over the stones as to render it no easy matter for the men to keep their seats, "there will be a spill presently if this baste of a driver isn't careful."

The negro also looked anxious and was holding on for dear life, but the Professor, being ponderous and heavy, had braced himself and was not very much annoyed, by the violent motion of the carriage.

"Take it easy, boys!" he exclaimed, "it can't last long."

"No, sah, de carriage won't stand it," the negro observed, solemnly.

"That's so! a truer wourd than that was niver spoken, bedad!" the Irishman chimed in; "off will come a wheel nixt, and into the gutter we'll go, and if we don't break our necks it will be bekase we are lucky."

"Never mind the risk; the pay is good, boys, and if we once succeed in getting our game, it will be a hundred dollars in each of your pockets."

"If we break our necks beforehand mighty little good it will do us, I'm thinking," the Irishman grumbled.

"I'ze more afeard, boss, dat we will git in trouble wid de police," the black observed; "dat critter is gwine to fight like a tiger-cat, when we puts our claws on her."

"Oh, don't trouble your head about that; the police will not bother us when they understand the matter," the Professor answered; "but I want to avoid a scene if possible. It is important that the affair should not get into the newspapers. If we can get hold of her, gag her, get her into the coach and then take her down to the steamer without attracting attention I should like it; and the party that employs us would like it, also; and, although I have no right to promise such a thing, yet I feel sure that it would be money in our pockets."

"See hyer, boss, dis yere t'ing has cost a heap a'ready, hain't it?" asked the negro, abruptly.

"Yes; but the party who pays has got plenty, and in this matter wouldn't grudge a thousand dollars or two."

The carriage came to a sudden halt, and the Professor, expecting that the prey was hunted down, at once sprung from the coach, followed by the other two.

Sure enough; there was the other coach, at a standstill; a little knot of people was gathered around it, while one man grasped the reins by the horses' heads; but the woman was not to be seen.

The Professor, a shrewd man, understood the game at once. The moment the coach had turned the corner the woman had quitted it, and the horses had kept on in their wild career until stopped by the venturesome fellow who had thought it was a runaway and had dashed out into the street and stopped the steeds in their flight.

But, after she had left the coach, whither had she gone? and by what miracle had the woman, incumbered with her skirts, succeeded in making the desperate leap and escaped unhurt?

The Professor mingled with the crowd; he was after information, but none could he gain; not a man of them had seen the woman.

"She probably went in at the first open door!" cried the Professor as, having leaped from his carriage, he turned back to the corner. "It was a cunning trick, but we will have her yet!"

The first house from the corner was unoccupied, and being tightly locked it was impossible that the woman could have found shelter there.

The second house was the theatrical boarding mansion kept by Mrs. Mallory, and the Professor at once pitched upon this as the probable place of refuge.

"The main door would be apt to be fastened, of course, but the basement one might be unlocked," he remarked, as he hurried down under the main entrance.

And, sure enough, the basement door was not fastened, so the three entered without ceremony. A passage led into the yard beyond and the men traversed it, their idea being that the woman would not attempt to hide within the house, but would proceed through to the yard and endeavor to make her escape in that direction.

In the yard was a small wood-shed with a dilapidated door and through the chinks in this door the black dress of the woman was seen. With a cry the three pursuers precipitated themselves against the door.

CHAPTER X.

A SURPRISE.

THEY had fairly "treed" the game; and ex-

pecting a stout resistance they had thrown themselves against the door with all their force, and as the door was not fastened the consequence was that all fell headlong into the woodshed, in a heap.

Again the woman had tricked them! Anticipating that she would be followed, she had stripped off her dress and hung it up just within the shed as a decoy!

The hare had baffled the hounds.

The three picked themselves up, rubbing their bruised limbs ruefully.

"We shall have to begin the chase all over again!" the Professor exclaimed, in disgust. "She must have a disguise on underneath her dress, and the chances now are that we will have a hard time in getting upon her track again."

Evidently she had scaled the fence, got into the next yard and had then made her way into the next street through the house to which the yard belonged.

The Professor mounted an ash-barrel and took a survey of the adjoining premises, but not the slightest sign did he see of the fugitive.

Dennis now suggested:

"Shure, don't ye think, Mister McDonald, that we had better be afther callin' in the police to help us?"

"Oh, no!" demurred the Professor, "this is no case for the police. We want to keep the thing quiet. All the fat would be in the fire if we let the authorities know anything about it. And, to think that I wrote to the madam yesterday that I had got a certain clew to her whereabouts and that by to-night we should probably have her on board of the steamer and be on our way to the South."

"She's a born imp, sah, for sure!" the negro exclaimed, with a sagacious shake of the head. "She's beat us all to nuffin, I guess."

"All is not lost yet, boys," declared the Professor; "we have got a sort of a clew. That man in the doorway whom she was talking with when she caught sight of us may know something about her. We'll go after him at once."

"How about the dress—shall we l'ave it?" asked the Irishman, with a covetous look at the well-made garment.

"Yes, I will speak to the folks in the house about it; she may come back to claim it and so afford us a clew. We mustn't leave a stone unturned to accomplish our object," the Professor announced.

As the three turned to reënter the house they encountered Mrs. Mallory who had noticed the strangers acting in such a suspicious manner on her premises and had come down to see what they wanted.

The Professor proceeded to explain. He and his companions were in search of a lady who was unhappily a little affected in the head, not exactly crazy, and yet not really sane, except at intervals. And when one of her peculiar moods came on it was her fancy to imagine that she was pursued by enemies and she would adopt any means of escape that offered.

He showed the lady the dress which his patient, as he described the fugitive to be, had worn.

"It is very evident," he explained, "that her malady has come on worse than usual this time, for it is plain by her leaving this dress behind that she has provided herself with another one under it; that shows that her mind is strongly set on this delusion that she is pursued, else she would not have adopted this ingenious plan of throwing her pursuers off the track. So, madam, if she returns for the dress, as she probably will, if you will have the kindness to detain her if possible, by gentle means of course, and send word to me, you will greatly oblige me, and will be doing a service to this deeply afflicted woman;" and as he finished the Professor handed Mrs. Mallory a card upon which he had penned his address.

The Professor had a very plausible, easy way with him, and the boarding-house keeper, although a keen woman of the world and much given to suspicion, never for an instant doubted the truth of the story.

"Well, I will do all I can for you," she replied, putting the card away carefully. "What is the lady's name?"

"Oglethorpe, Mrs. Thomas Oglethorpe is her right name, but when these fits are upon her, she very seldom owns to it, but calls herself by half-a-dozen odd appellations."

"I will try and detain her if she comes for the dress until I can send for you," Mrs. Mallory promised.

The Professor was profuse with his thanks,

and then, with his companions, took his departure.

Bidding the hack follow them the Professor and his satellites proceeded directly to the back door of Niblo's Garden Theater.

By this time about all the people engaged in the evening performance were in the house, and the old back-door-keeper, seated upon his chair and pulling away at his pipe, was yet cogitating over his peculiar interview with the mysterious woman.

"Blessed if I can make head or tail of it," he muttered. "Guess she must be a circus-rider or else she never could make that leap onto the hack. I never see'd anything like it since I was born."

With the mind of the old man in this state the Professor had no trouble in getting from him all that he knew in regard to the woman, which was little enough.

She appeared to know Miss Sara Pearl and had insisted upon going into the theater after her, although warned that it was against the rules, and then she had made the sudden rush, ending with the leap on the hack, and that was all that the old doorkeeper knew about the affair.

The Professor did not reveal who he was, or that he had any particular interest in her doings, but merely spoke as if he was a bystander who had become interested in the affair. He was careful, though, to make a note of Miss Sara Pearl's name, for if the woman did know Pearl, through the actress he might be able to find the fugitive. Two wires had the Professor laid, but, after all, he trusted more to chance or accident than to anything else. By accident he had got upon the track in the first place, and though the woman had been clever enough to throw him off yet he trusted that he might be lucky enough to strike the trail a second time.

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEXPECTED PROPOSAL.

THE country girl returned home completely discouraged, but Sara cheered her up by exciting her self-assertion.

"My dear, if you listen to the cry of the world, you will believe that all the theater-managers in the country are on the alert to secure talent—to encourage rising genius, and all that sort of thing; but, it isn't so; they don't care a fig for anything but to make money; that is what they are all after, and why should any one blame them? It isn't their business to establish an art-school. When the genius is made apparent—when all the world is ready to rush to see it, and ready to pay their money for the privilege, then the managers will gladly come to terms; but, like men in any other business, they are not anxious to buy a pig in a poke; they want to see the animal, small blame to them! and know what they are paying their money for."

"I begin to despair," and the novice's troubled face did not gainsay her words.

"Oh, good gracious, you mustn't despair; that will never do!" the lively Sara protested. "Never despair is the motto to win with in this world. But, there; I never thought of it before! There is another chance—there are the dramatic agents."

Miss Bell looked at the actress, inquiringly; she did not understand the meaning of the term.

"The dramatic agents are the brokers who deal in goods theatrical—living goods—actors and actresses. A manager wants a company; he goes to the dramatic agent and makes known to him his desire, and at once the agent proceeds to supply it. You are an actress out of employment; you go to the agent, and he puts your name down in his book: Miss Helen Bell, leading lady, chambermaid, or whatever line it is that you profess to play, your residence, etc., and then, when a manager comes in, searching for talent, the agent submits your name among the rest; in fact, not to put a fine point on it, a regular intelligence office."

"But, I am not an actress, you know," the other demurred, with a sinking heart.

"That doesn't make any difference; amateurs as well as regular professionals put their names down. Mind, dear, I don't say that there is much of any chance for you, for honestly, I don't believe there is, but it is just as well you should try it, then you will be satisfied. I know old Stubbs has made up his mind to get you in at Niblo's, for he was talking about you again to-day, but until you are satisfied there isn't any other chance for you, I presume you won't be willing to make your *début* in the Black Crook?"

"Oh, no; I would rather not!" the girl exclaimed, impulsively. The very thought was odious to her.

Sara shrugged her shoulders, and laughed. "Well, well, the descent from Juliet to the Black Crook is rather startling, but if you are really in earnest about becoming an actress, I am afraid you will have to get used to it. But, try the agents this afternoon, and see what you can do with them. I will go with you, if you like"—an offer which Helen eagerly accepted. "Oh, if you will be so kind!" she cried, gratefully.

Sara sniffed scornfully at the idea of kindness in the matter, and so it was settled that, after dinner, the two should visit the dramatic agency.

At the table, that day, the veteran stage-manager, the rat-like Stubbs, was unusually gracious, much to the general surprise, for Stubbs was a crusty old customer, and seldom wasted words upon anybody. But, on this occasion he was quite genial, entered into conversation with Miss Bell, and remarked that he had noticed her presence at the theater, and added that he presumed she would like to see the performance from the front of the house, and, if so, he would be happy to get her a "pass" at any time; not that she wasn't welcome behind the scenes, for she was at liberty to come there at her pleasure.

This was Sara's opportunity to put in a word, as she perceived the tyrant of the stage was in an unusual good-humor. So she proceeded to explain that she had taken the liberty to bring Miss Bell in behind the scenes, although she knew it was against the rules.

The stage-manager replied that it was all right, and that if the guardian of the back-door said anything, to refer to him; Miss Bell was quite welcome at any time.

This was a point gained, but Sara, with all her shrewdness, was puzzled to account for this kindness in the usually cross-grained Stubbs.

The meal ended, the two girls robed themselves for the street, and departed upon their mission.

The dramatic agency was located in Union Square—merely a large store upon the ground floor divided by partitions into three little offices.

Quite a number of well-dressed gentlemen were lounging about in front of the agency and some few were in the offices; they were gathered in little groups of three and four, the majority of them either flourishing light canes or else industriously engaged in sucking the heads of their sticks. They looked like a lot of spruce young clerks, only they didn't stare at the two ladies as they passed into the office half as unblushingly as the average clerk would have done.

"All actors waiting for a job," Sara explained, as they passed through the crowd. Quite a number knew Miss Pearl and they hastened to bow in the most elaborate manner.

Within the inner office sat the dramatic agent; he was a short, thick-set gentleman with a very insinuating way with him, and when Miss Bell was introduced he received her in a manner which seemed to imply that he was really hungry for the pleasure of her acquaintance.

Miss Sara explained what her friend desired, and the agent promptly answered that there wasn't the least doubt in regard to an engagement, for, as he explained in a confidential way, there was a dearth of talented young actresses and he had daily applications from managers that he could not supply.

Helen was much cheered by this assurance, notwithstanding she detected the incredulous look upon the face of her companion.

The agent, taking down a large book, proceeded to register the name and address of the young lady. Just as he had completed this formality, a gentleman in the outer office stuck his head in at the door and begged for a few minutes' conversation with the agent. He at once excused himself to the two ladies and withdrew to the outer apartment where he and his caller were soon engaged in a busy conversation, both with note-books in hand, apparently settling some weighty matter.

The register was left open upon the desk and as the two girls were seated directly in front of the desk, and the dramatic agent wrote a remarkably large and plain hand, it was only natural that they should glance at the page to note what was written thereon.

It was headed:

"NOVICES—WOULD-BE ACTRESSES."

Then came a long list of names, twenty-five or thirty at the least, and opposite some of the names the genial intermediary man had penned a few remarks.

Sara's lip curled as she noted this and she commented audibly upon the fact.

"Looks as if there was a dearth of amateur actresses, eh?" she observed. "This list of names proves that, conclusively; and, see what the scamp has written opposite some of them. 'Miss Belle McKeene; awfully green; splendid diamonds though. Minnie Partridge; weighs about 200; fine for fat woman for a museum; wants to play Juliet, oh, heavens! Pauline Hyester; ugly as sin; got stamps; might back a troupe on the road if talked to sweet. Clara Peacock; high-toned but soft as mush. Lizzie Kendleton; red-headed and crazy as a bedbug. Mary Blackie; poor and proud, a Bowery shop-girl, maybe. Etta Codrington; too smart for anything.' And now, dear, I wonder what he will put after your name?"

The hot flush of shame swept over the young girl's face.

"Isn't it disgraceful?" she murmured.

"Ah, you see you have got a great deal to learn yet about the stage," Sara replied. "The amateur who desires to go upon the stage is thought to be fair game for ridicule by almost every one. This oily scamp undoubtedly talked just as fair and smooth to all these girls, against whose names he has penned these insulting remarks, as he did just now to you. The man can't help it; it comes natural to him. To use slang, he must give 'taffy' to every one he meets."

"Then there isn't any chance for me?" Helen asked, despairingly.

"Yes, a chance to be struck by lightning, as they say in the negro farce; but, come; you don't want to see any more of this octopus, do you?"

"No; let us go!" Hope was at dead low tide now.

"Old Stubbs is going to do something for you," Sara assured, confidently, as they rose to their feet. "And, after all, what difference does it make whether you get on the stage in the Black Crook, so long as you do get on, or in one of Shakespeare's tragedies?"

"Very true; and since I am determined to become an actress, why, I would be foolish to refuse the only chance that seems to be open to me."

"That is the right way to look at the matter; it is just like washing your face on a cold winter's morning; the water is terribly chilly, and makes you shiver to look at it, but, after the first plunge, you get used to the cold and think nothing of it."

The agent intercepted the two ladies as they departed and was profuse in his apologies for having been obliged to leave them, and he earnestly desired Miss Bell to call again, as he felt sure he could soon procure an engagement for her when once the managers became acquainted with her appearance; and then, as the two girls walked out of the office, Sara remarked to her companion:

"He wants you to come and sit in his office so that the managers can get a look at you and note your fine points like the girls in the intelligence offices. On the stage we must make merchandise of our figures and our faces. That is the disagreeable part of the profession, but to stand upon the stage and sway a thousand people at our own sweet will, making them laugh or cry at our bidding, that is where the glory of the art comes in."

Helen sighed; stage life, she already saw, was not all that her fancy had painted it, and a question that many an anxious mind had debated before was beginning to trouble her: Did the glory of the art compensate for the discomforts of the life?

Sara, from the fund of her experience, could have answered the question easily enough. Yes, it did compensate, if you were a great star. If you won one of the great prizes in the lottery, all well and good; but if, instead of a prize, you drew but a blank, then it was more than an open question.

Dark and dismal indeed appeared the prospect, and the adventuring girl quite despaired; but, to prove the old saying that the darkest hour is always before the dawn, that very evening a gleam of light suddenly shone upon Helen's life path. She accompanied Sara to the theater; old Stubbs met them as they came in, and in the most gracious manner possible invited Miss Bell to come down and stand in the prompt place, where, as he said, she would have some chance to see what was going on. Something entirely out of the common was this invitation, for the prompt place at Niblo's—the first entrance on the right-hand side—is always sacred to the prompter and his assistants. The prompter is the stage official who attends to the

ringing up and down of the curtain, the changes of the scenes, and assists the actors when one happens to forget his part, by whispering the words to him, the whispers sometimes loud enough for everybody in the audience to hear. And of all the stage-managers that anybody had ever seen, Stubbs was the most particular about the prompt entrance, and usually raged like a mad bull when any one dared to disregard his mandate and stand there; therefore, great was Sara's wonder at Stubbs's invitation.

"What on earth is the man up to?" she muttered to herself, but she did not say anything to her companion. Miss Bell, totally ignorant of course of stage matters, thought the old gentleman was very kind, and thanked him as politely as she could, without being in the least aware that, in order to favor her, he had broken through one of his most stringent rules.

But there were more and greater surprises in store for Sara that evening.

Among the ladies who were employed in the piece, a half-dozen represented village girls, friends of the heroine, and with the principal one of these girls—a tall, dark-eyed, queenly beauty, about as handsome a girl as there was on the stage—old Stubbs took occasion to kick up a most ridiculous row at the end of one of the acts. No sooner was the curtain down than he bounded onto the stage in a frightful state of anger.

"Miss Lane—Miss Lane!" he cried.

The girl turned in astonishment, for the tone foreboded danger.

"How dared you laugh at the audience in such a manner?" he continued, angrily. "It is really disgraceful! I won't have any such goings on."

"I didn't laugh, sir!" exclaimed the girl, indignant at the accusation, which really was almost entirely unfounded, for she had only smiled slightly at seeing a gentleman in the front row of the orchestra with a large bouquet in his hand which she knew very well was intended for her.

"You did! I saw you! Do you think I have lost the use of my eyes?" Stubbs retorted, angrily. "If I catch you doing such a thing again I will discharge you on the spot."

"Oh, you needn't trouble yourself to do that, sir," cried the girl, "firing" up. "If you don't like the way I behave all you have to do is to say so and I will go."

"Well, I don't like it; and, what's more, I won't have it; and since you are so independent, suppose you quit after next Saturday night?"

"That suits me," the girl replied, haughtily, and then with a toss of the head she marched off the stage.

"She has been putting on airs for some time," Stubbs observed, turning to Sara Pearl, who was at his elbow, and had witnessed the scene; "and now there is a chance for your friend yonder. She can commence Monday—six dollars a week," and with a very self-satisfied look Stubbs proceeded to his duties.

Pearl, with all her stage experience, was astounded. It was all clear to her now. Stubbs had picked a quarrel with Miss Lane in order to get an opportunity to discharge her, and so make a vacancy for Miss Bell. At first Sara was inclined to tell her friend all about the matter, and warn her that Stubbs evidently had some deep purpose in view or he would never have taken so much trouble about the matter; but, upon second thought, she resolved to refrain.

"No; let the play go on," she muttered. "The girl is no fool; she knows enough to take care of herself, and if she didn't I do, and no one shall make a victim of her while I am around."

Miss Bell of course was delighted at her good fortune. The dress of the peasant girl was a modest one, and she had no objection to wearing it.

And so it came to pass that the novice made her first appearance upon the stage. Aided by Sara's practiced care she made a beautiful appearance, and old Stubbs went out of his way to compliment her.

The stage manager had made up his mind that she should rise—and as he was in supreme command of the stage, if an opportunity did not exist he made one.

After Miss Bell had been on the stage for a couple of weeks, and so in a measure got used to the novel position, Stubbs took occasion one night to find fault with one of the girls who had a few words to speak in a scene. He complained that she didn't speak loud enough; they said at the front of the house that they couldn't hear her, and then abruptly turning to the young girl he exclaimed:

"Here, Miss Bell, you try that speech next week."

This capped the climax. Already Stubbs's attention to the girl had been noticed, but now she began to feel the influence of that jealousy which is so strongly a part of the artist's life.

Sneering remarks were openly made, so that Miss Bell could hear about "Stubbs's favorite," "the stage manager's pet," and had it not been for Sara's friendship, she would be actress would have had a hard time of it, for the moment that Stubbs singled her out as a favorite, the rest almost unanimously united against her, and nearly all protested that she would never be able to speak the lines which had been entrusted to her.

But, she did, and spoke them well, for she possessed a beautiful voice, very clear, very sweet, and very strong. Stubbs, in the prompter's box, watched her anxiously, and when he saw that she had succeeded, he rubbed his hands together gleefully and exclaimed to the prompter: "I knew that girl would do—I knew that she had stuff in her."

The *débutante* was one girl picked out of ten thousand, for she faced the footlights undauntedly, without displaying the least tremor, and even her jealous rivals were compelled to admit that, undoubtedly, she had the making of an actress in her.

Two weeks more and, thanks to Stubbs, at a single bound Miss Bell ascended half a dozen rounds of that extremely steep and uncertain ladder that leads to the temple of fame.

The lady who played the heroine in the Crook was out of sorts one night; it was whispered that she had quarreled with her husband, separated from him, and that a suit for divorce was in the near future; anyway, she did not act with her accustomed skill. Stubbs, as watchful as a terrier after a rat, proceeded to take her to task for not attending to her business. She wasn't in any humor to be scolded, and so a "flare-up" took place, ending with the lady indignantly declaring that she would never act another night under Stubbs's stage management. This was precisely what the crafty old fellow wanted; so Miss Gracie Plantagnet got her walking-papers, and Miss Helen Bell was put in for the part. It was very short; no chance for acting, and about all that one had to do was to look pretty and speak the lines, which the *débutante* did fully as well as the other lady. The managers in front were content, for lady No. 1 had received thirty dollars per week, while Miss Bell was glad to take eight. This was Stubbs's strategy, for if he had not saved the box-office twenty-two dollars per week, the managers might have objected to the change.

So the country girl had become an actress, not a good one by any means, for all she yet knew how to do was to look pretty and pronounce her speeches intelligently.

A month longer the play ran and then the end came; a new "spectacle," as the play which relies for its attractiveness upon scenes, costumes, etc., rather than upon acting, is called, was about to be produced, and Stubbs had already spoken to Miss Bell about playing a part in it. Sara was not to remain, having engaged to go with a traveling troupe who were about to astonish the small cities with the glories of the Black Crook. Our ambitious girl was in a dilemma, for she was also offered an engagement at a good salary with the traveling troupe and she did not like the idea of separating from her friend, but Sara advised her to remain at Niblo's.

"You have got a good position; hold onto it, but demand more salary; you don't get enough to live on now, to say nothing about dressing your parts properly."

But Miss Bell was not fated to remain at Niblo's Theater. At last old Stubbs showed his hand. He requested the pleasure of Miss Bell's company in the parlor at the boarding-house, one day, and then, in the most formal manner, made her an offer of his heart and hand. The girl was completely surprised; and Stubbs, perceiving that she hesitated to answer, proceeded to explain that in part his offer was made in a purely business light; he was satisfied that she had great talents for the stage, and, aided by his influence and knowledge, he could make a star out of her and a fortune could be won.

This was the secret of Stubbs's interest in the girl. He was getting old; work was beginning to be oppressive, and he wanted some one to support and care for him in his decline.

With a sinking heart Helen declined the offer. At one fell blow her bright and airy fabric was shattered. She had believed that Stubbs's interest in her had arisen because with the eyes of experience he saw that she was going to

make a great actress and wished to be the first to encourage rising genius, after the fashion of the kind gentlemen of whom she had read in novels; but, alas! those gentlemen seemed to exist in novels only.

Stubbs was enraged and said bluntly that she was an idiot, and that without his aid she would never get on. The discussion was becoming unpleasant; so Helen ended it by withdrawing from the apartment.

Sara laughed when with sorrow the girl related to her the particulars of the interview.

"I could have told you that he had some scheme in his head a long time ago!" she protested. "Mighty few men have I found in this world who will assist a friendless girl just for the pleasure of doing a good deed—that is, as far as my experience goes. So it is to be the Black Crook and the 'road' after all. Well, sit down, dear; write to the manager and tell him that you will accept his offer. I don't like to travel, for it is an awful hard life, but it is a solid party, the money is sure, and we are likely to have a long season. Anyway, I am glad that we are not to be separated, for something seems to tell me that I am going to be of a great deal of use to you one of these days."

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE ROAD.

AFTER a week of rehearsing in New York, De Silvio's Mammoth Black Crook Party—so the organization was termed—"took the road," to use the theatrical phrase.

New Haven had been fixed upon as the opening city, and the entire troupe left New York by the Sunday evening boat. There were twenty-four people in the company, so that there was quite a party. The managers and proprietors were the De Silvio brothers, the well-known dancers, but the moneyed man who found the wealth which was to sustain the show was a De Silvio from private life, of whom no one had ever heard before, as he was not a professional. The two De Silvios, the dancers, were tall, Frenchy-looking fellows, but the third was apparently the youngest of the three, and was slight in build, very dark in complexion and looked a great deal like a Cuban. He was a very quiet, retired sort of fellow, and rarely joined in the general conversation.

As it was a beautiful moonlight night, nearly all of the troupe were on deck, enjoying the sail up the Sound. Sara and Miss Bell kept together, and had rather withdrawn from the rest of the party, selecting a retired spot by the wheel-house.

Miss Nellie Richmond formed one of the party, and as was usual with that erratic damsel, she had contrived to get herself into hot water at the very beginning of the trip. No state-room had been secured for her, and when she ascertained this fact she at once took the managers to task about it, but the De Silvio brothers were old stagers and laughed the irate "serio-comic" to scorn.

"You can hire the whole boat if you like!" one of them exclaimed. "We only agree to ordinary accommodations, no sleeping-cars, no state-rooms, and if you don't like it, you can get off and walk."

In a fit of rage Miss Richmond departed to interview the clerk in regard to a state-room, and so it happened that she was not on deck when a tall, handsome fellow made his appearance in the midst of the troupe. He was a very distinguished-looking man, with curling black hair, which he wore quite long, finely-cut features, and a generally aristocratic look about him.

He was at once accosted for he was widely known among professionals.

"Hello, Mallory!" was the cry.

And it was indeed the young actor of whom the reader has already heard considerable—Gordon Mallory, the son of the boarding-house-keeper.

With that careless air of easy grace which became him so well, the actor acknowledged the salutation.

"Where are you going?" was asked.

"To New Haven; I'm a member of your party now," he replied. "I am going to do Rudolph. Your other man sent word at the last minute that he couldn't join, and so they came hot-foot after me."

"Glad of it!" exclaimed one of the performers, heartily. "You will find that you are in good company. By the way, we have one of your particular friends along—Sara Pearl."

"Yes?" and the young man smiled; he understood the object of the remark. It had once

been widely reported that he and Miss Pearl were likely to make a match.

"She is forward, by the wheel-house," added another of the party.

"I must go and see her then," and nodding to the group he proceeded in the direction indicated.

The moon was so bright that the deck was almost as light as by day, so Mallory had no trouble in finding Miss Pearl, but, great was his surprise when he beheld her companion.

"Can it be possible?" he cried, in amazement.

"Mr. Mallory!" and Miss Bell, rising, tendered him her hand, while a soft blush crept over her cheeks.

The keen eyes of Sara Pearl were upon the faces of the two, and she read what was written there.

"So, so!" she thought to herself; "sits the wind in that quarter? You are in love with each other, eh? Well, you will make a nice couple!"

And Sara Pearl was right, for a better matched, or a handsomer pair, it would have been hard to find.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss—"

"Bell—Helen Bell, that is my name," the girl hastened to say.

Keen-witted Sara noted this speech at once.

"Oh," she murmured, "the sly puss has only given me a half-confidence. Helen Bell isn't her right name, after all."

And as Gordon Mallory pressed the tiny outstretched gloved hand which had been extended to him, the sagacious Miss Pearl noticed a peculiar look stealing over his face—a look that puzzled her clever as she was. He was evidently glad to see the girl, and yet he was troubled in his mind by the unexpected event. He glanced about him in a nervous sort of way as if he feared that some one was watching him.

"I am on the stage now," the girl added.

"With this party?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is strange; I have just joined."

"Rudolph concluded not to come, then?" Sara asked.

"Yes, at the last minute, and they hunted me up to take his place; I only arrived in town this evening, too."

"Well, this lady plays your sweetheart. Aren't you glad?" Sara demanded, mischievously.

The words and the manner in which they were spoken alike confused Helen, and again the faint pink blush tinged her cheeks.

"Oh, yes," and Mallory essayed to smile, but he was strangely disturbed; there was an awkward moment of silence and then the young man in a nervous way went on with his speech. "Miss Pearl, as you are now aware, this lady and myself have met before, and although it was just a chance acquaintance, and I presume that neither of us ever expected to be fortunate enough to see the other again, yet that chance acquaintanceship will, I am sorely afraid, be productive of much evil to both of us if it is known to the world at large."

It was a strange speech, and it wasn't a wonder that it made the two girls open their eyes.

"I cannot explain why I speak in this manner," he hastened to say; "it is impossible for me to explain, but what I have stated is the truth. It must not be known to any one that we have ever met before. I do not ask you, Miss Bell—he hesitated a moment on the name—"to tell an untruth. No one is likely to question you, and yet, if you were questioned, and I were questioned also, both of us could reply with honest candor that Gordon Mallory and Helen Bell never met until this night. Is not that so, Miss Bell?"

A faint smile appeared upon the girl's lips.

"It is a juggle with words; an old-time minister, deep in the trickery of state-craft, might consider it truth."

"It harms no one, and may save both of us from a great deal of trouble—misery, perhaps!" the young man exclaimed, with deep earnestness.

Sara, though she could not understand it, saw that Mallory was very much interested in the matter, and thought that it was only right for her to aid him to the extent of her power.

"Well, for my part, I don't see why you shouldn't keep the acquaintanceship a secret if you want to," she remarked. "It isn't any one's business but your own, as far as I can see, and if you choose to keep the matter to yourselves, you surely do not wrong any one else."

But, Helen was troubled; upon her woman's mind the shadow of danger lowered; but from

whom, or how, or where the evil threatened she could not guess.

"Well, be it so," she said, after quite a pause; "the past is dead and gone, and now, Sara, please introduce me to this gentleman," and she smiled through the troubled look which had overspread her face.

With all due gravity Sara introduced the two.

"And now sit down!" she cried, "and tell me where you have been for such a long time, what parties have you been with, how was business, and did you get your money?"

Miss Pearl was nothing if not practical.

Nothing loth, the young actor sat down by the two ladies, and soon they were all busy in conversation, the cloud which had at first fallen upon them having passed away.

Fifteen or twenty minutes were spent in conversation, Mallory improving the opportunity to watch the face of the country girl, and never did this rare beauty look more rarely beautiful than under the soft light of the moon.

The hum of the conversation of the parties upon the stern of the boat came quite distinctly to the ears of the trio who were enjoying themselves so well, and every now and then a burst of laughter would break out on the air. And then, just as the conversation between the three flagged for a moment, a shriller laugh than usual—evidently from a woman's throat—came out clear on the night air.

This laugh seemed to affect Mallory unpleasantly, for a perceptible shiver shook his frame and a shade came over his handsome face.

"What a disagreeable laugh!" he exclaimed; "it seems to go right to the marrow of one's bones."

Miss Pearl turned up her nose in scorn. She knew the laugh well enough.

"Don't you know who that is?" she asked; "but perhaps you are not acquainted with the—lady. It's Nellie Richmond!"

Then there was a dead silence. Mallory sat with his eyes fixed upon the deck as if he had not heard the name.

Miss Pearl looked at him in astonishment; had the man suddenly become deaf?

"Nellie Richmond, the serio-comic singer," she repeated.

"Yes, I know her. I must go and see about my state-room now, if you ladies will excuse me," and he rose and precipitately retreated, a stony look upon his face.

"What on earth has got into the man?" Sara demanded.

But, Mallory did not go to see about his state-room; no! He sought the other side of the boat, found a chair in the shadow, and seating himself in it, bowed his head upon the rail and groaned in anguish.

But not unobserved, for a light form had followed him, seated itself by his side and then laid a hand upon his shoulder.

Mallory started and raised his head; a glittering, keen-edged knife flashed before his face, and an angry pair of eyes looked into his dark orbs.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERY.

"You miserable wretch, why shouldn't I drive this steel home to your heart?" It was Nell Richmond who spoke.

"Because, you tiger-cat, you haven't the courage," Mallory replied, sternly, confronting the woman with eyes as angry as her own.

"Hav'n't I the courage? Don't you dare to try me too far!" she retorted.

"Put up your knife and don't make a fool of yourself; you will attract people's attention in a moment."

"What do I care if I do?" rejoined the woman, defiantly. "What do I care if I do?" she repeated. "What do I care if the whole world knows what is between you and I?"

"Will you stop your noise?" he exclaimed, hoarsely, and with a face white with passion. "You have been drinking, and the liquor has upset what little sense there is in that crazy head of yours."

"I have only had a glass or two of champagne, and, my heavens! if I am not to drink, how can I ever get through this terrible life of mine?" the woman exclaimed, wildly, yet obeying the injunctions of the other, and sinking her voice so as not to attract observation.

"It is the wine that puts you up to these infernal tricks," he went on, bitterly. "But, put up your knife, or I will take and toss it overboard."

"You won't dare!"

"Won't I?" he cried through his firm-set

teeth—"not only the knife, but you after it, if you provoke me!"

"Oh, yes, I don't doubt that you would like to do it," and she replaced the knife in her bosom, and smiled mockingly in the face of the man. "No doubt you would like to put me out of the way, so that you would be free to enjoy your new beauty."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I know all about it! I know all about your love-affair with this country girl, and how she came to your mother's house in New York after you. I was there at the time. I boarded at your mother's house all the time I was playing at Niblo's."

"I would not have thought you would have dared to do that."

"And why not?"

"She would have killed you if she had known who you really were."

"Yes, but she did not know, and who was to tell her, eh? Instinct? Not much! Oh! it was rare good fun for me to sit at the table and watch her face, trace there the likeness to your own, and wonder to myself how many of the lines of care upon your mother's face were due to me."

"You are a devil, if ever there was one in this world!" and young Mallory clenched his hands with a savage impulse in his heart to throttle her.

"But she hated me, though; take that for your consolation. She hated me without knowing who and what I was—without for an instant suspecting that I was the woman who had wrecked all the ambitious hopes which she had once formed for her son."

"See here! I am getting tired of this sort of thing!" and Mallory's voice quivered with passion as he spoke. "How much longer is this to go on? Do you think for one moment that I am going to submit all the rest of my life to this?"

"And what hope of escape is there for me?" she demanded, bitterly. "You are selfish, like all men; you think only of yourself, and you never give a thought to my position."

"You promised to let me alone and not trouble me, if I would agree to act likewise with you."

"Do you suppose I have water in my veins instead of blood?" she demanded, fiercely. "Do you think I am going to submit to your love-affair with this country girl? You would be marrying her next, I suppose, if I didn't put a stopper on the match."

"That is beyond your power," he replied, coldly.

"What is beyond my power?" she asked in heat, her manner a strange contrast to his.

"To stop me from marrying any one, if I choose so to do."

"I can stop you."

"You cannot."

"Oh, perhaps I don't put it right, I am a woman, and all women, they say, are illogical!" she retorted, with bitter scorn. "Well, we will say that you can marry—that I cannot stop you—but, can't I make the woman that weds you wish that she was in Heaven, or the other place, if I choose to speak?"

"No, you cannot—not if she is a sensible woman."

"Well, you just try it, and then we will see."

"You are with this party, then?" Mallory asked.

"Yes, and so are you, and so is she!" and then again Nell Richmond's shrill laughter floated out on the clear, still air of the night. "How lucky it is that we are all here, together! I feel sometimes as if I ought to kill the girl for coming between you and me—oh, don't attempt to deny it; I know all about it; I heard how you made her acquaintance in some country town, and you made quick work of it, too, didn't you? Only one day's acquaintance, and she vowed to be yours, and gave you her picture—"

"No, you are wrong; your informant lied this time. She never gave me her picture."

"Didn't she? Well, I found it in your pocket, nevertheless!" she cried, with an air of triumph. "Do you remember when you came to New York after that country trip? I sent for you and told you that I wanted some money; you brought it to me, and I saw the picture in your breast-pocket, and, when I kissed you good-by, I stole it!" Again the woman laughed shrilly, while a look of inexpressible disgust came over the face of the young man.

"Oh, you would like to kill me now, wouldn't you?" she went on, tauntingly, as she noticed the look upon his face. "It will be rare fun for me. I will just watch the play; you are after this girl and she is agreeable, but I, in the back-

ground, know that I can upset the whole affair at any moment by coming forward, so I shall let the puppets dance on."

"Nell, this has got to come to an end," the young actor declared, a strange, hard look upon his face as he bent forward and placed a hand that was cold as ice upon the girl's wrist. The cold touch sent a chill through her frame—ugly, passionate vixen that she was.

"What do you mean?" she asked, a touch of apprehension in her voice.

"Exactly what I say:—this cannot go on—it must come to a stop. Your life is not a happy one, is it?"

"No, and you wrecked it."

"God help me! It was not all my fault!" he exclaimed, bitterly. "You were as much to blame as I—perhaps a little more, for you were a woman while I was nothing but a boy."

"I'm no older than you are!" she retorted, sullenly.

"Yes, you are, fully ten years older; it isn't of any use for you to deny the truth for I know it. I was not twenty, wild and headstrong, the slave of passion, and like all boys at that age I believed I knew everything, and prided myself upon the knowledge. You came in my way; you did your best to fascinate me; you tried all the arts dear to the heart of a wily, beautiful woman; you succeeded, and you know the rest. That was a good ten years ago, and the dark cloud that arose out of our folly now hangs over us. I am more merciful than you; I bear you no hatred for the ills that are past. If you should find a good man whom you believed you could love, I should rejoice at it, and I would rather that my tongue should be torn from its roots than have it utter one single word to interfere with your happiness."

"Oh, you are so good—you are so generous!" with bitter scorn. "You wouldn't interfere in my happiness—oh, no! You are like the child who generously gives to a playmate the broken toy for which it has no longer any use. You are tired of me—you would be glad to get rid of me—the love you once bore me has turned into indifference—into hatred perhaps, and so you make a virtue of that which in your heart you are eagerly sighing for. But, I won't give you up! It doesn't matter whether I love or hate you; no other woman shall call you husband while I have the power to prevent it, and I will prevent, even at the risk of life. What do I care for life? I am tired of it, and would eagerly welcome death."

"So I feel sometimes—so I feel now!" he cried, abruptly. "Come, let us lock arms together and jump overboard; the dark waters will soon give us our quietus!"

But the woman was a coward with all her bravado; and she shrunk in horror from the offer.

"Oh, who is crazy now?" and she trembled as she shrunk from him.

"Am I to believe for a single instant that there is any truth, virtue or courage in you?" he retorted, fiercely. "But, go your ways; and, mark! cross me not or I shall have your blood upon my soul!"

Completely awed the woman glided away, actually appalled at the young actor's awful mood.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLOODHOUNDS.

On the forward deck of the steamboat, in a dark and secluded nook by the wheel-house, sat three men busily engaged in conversation—no common conversation, either, apparently, for they seemed apprehensive of being overheard, spoke in low and guarded tones, and whenever any one came near they stopped talking until the person, whoever it was, had passed out of ear-shot. And these three, when they came upon the boat, apparently were strangers to each other, although all had lounged around the gang-plank of the boat until the very last minute.

One was a tall, rather portly man, dressed in a good serviceable suit of clothes, decidedly unfashionable in cut, with gray hair and a full gray beard, carrying a small black portmanteau—evidently, to judge by his dress, a country merchant, or farmer, who had been paying a visit to the city. No 2 was a short, thick-set man all wrapped up in a big "ulster," which covered him from neck to heels. He had shaggy red hair and a bristling red beard, and that peculiar "horsey" appearance which seems to cling to men who have much to do with the noble animal. No 3 was a negro, a burly, well-fed gentleman of color, dressed entirely in black with a white "choker," green spectacles and an umbrella, rather the worse for

wear, a preacher, judging by his outward appearance.

These men had not come upon the boat together, nor even upon the dock in company. The gray-haired, gray-bearded man had been the first to make his appearance, and had arrived about eight o'clock—the boat left at nine; he had gone on board, and, apparently actuated by a sentiment of intense curiosity, had gone all over the boat from stem to stern, from the hurricane deck to the lower cabin. Very few of the passengers indeed had arrived and the man had the boat almost to himself. After he had finished his examination he took up his position amid a pile of freight, a short distance from the gangway, and where he could have a good view of everybody who went on or off the steamer.

The "horsey" man had been the next to make his appearance, and he had marched on the boat and procured his ticket at once, passing close to the first man, but no sign of recognition was exchanged between the two; and after he got his ticket he sat down in a chair, twenty feet or so from the gangway and amused himself by watching the passengers come on board. No. 3 some twenty minutes later, made his appearance, and neither of the first two noticed him, nor he them. He got his ticket and sauntered out on the dock and sat down on a barrel on the other side of the gangway from where No. 1 had taken his station.

And so it was that not a passenger came on board without being closely scrutinized by all of the three, although the inspection was so carefully and skillfully performed that not a soul suspected it.

The traveling troupe had come, all in a bunch as it were, and had passed on the boat in little squads of five and six, all busily engaged in conversation, and all full of talk and glee.

The minutes passed rapidly away; the warning bell was rung; "All on shore!" was called out; the passengers who were standing on the dock hurried on board; the gang-plank was drawn in; the boat moved slowly away from the pier and the journey began.

The three men manifested a strange restlessness after the boat got under way; they were almost continually on the move. Wherever a group of passengers collected one of the three would take pains to hover near for a few moments, evidently listening to the conversation yet exciting no suspicion.

And all the time no one of the three took the slightest notice of the others.

But, after this had gone on for about an hour, and the passengers had finally settled down for the trip, the three found their way to the sheltered nook which we have spoken of and entered into an earnest conversation.

Not wishing to make a mystery of the matter we will say at once that they were no strangers to the reader. The tall portly man was the Professor, the other two his assistants, O'Toole, the Irishman, and Oglethorpe, the negro.

"No signs of her, yet," McDonald remarked, expressing his disgust in his looks.

"Shure! she's not on board," O'Toole declared.

"Dat's de bressed trufe!" the negro admitted.

"Well, I am not so sure of that," the Professor demurred.

"Faix! we didn't see her come on board, and she is not on the boat if my two eyes are good for anything," the Irishman protested, stoutly.

"Deed, honey, I jess stared at ebery soul dere is on de boat and I didn't find her!" Oglethorpe asserted.

"And no more would she have discovered us if she is on board and was looking for us. We are disguised, and so completely, that our own mothers wouldn't know us. Now if we disguise ourselves so as to catch the girl isn't it likely she will disguise herself so as to escape our scrutiny?"

The others nodded in assent.

"There it is—there is the whole matter in a nutshell," McDonald continued. "We disguise ourselves so as to capture her; she disguises herself so as to escape from us. Now, then, the question is—are we any cleverer than she is?"

The three looked at each other, doubt plainly expressed upon their faces.

"I see you agree with me," the Professor went on. "If deeds go to prove anything she is the cleverest, for in this little trial of skill, so far, she has beaten us; she has even destroyed all clues, excepting the extremely slight one of her relations to this actress, Miss Pearl. She attempted to see her and appeared determined

so to do—why, I haven't the slightest idea, but my instinct told me that she would not be content until she had interviewed this actress, so, since that night, we have kept a close watch upon Miss Pearl, but so far without the slightest benefit; when I learned of this projected tour I made up my mind that if my guess was right, our bird would be on board this boat."

"But she ain't!" ejaculated the Irishman, assuredly.

"Not in her own proper person apparently, but she may be here, disguised. There are fifteen women in the party, and some of them are in vails and not wearing their own hair either. But for another reason I took this trip. The madam's instinct says that there is a certain place near to this town of New Haven where, sooner or later, our game will be sure to come. It is a little summer cottage down on the 'south shore,' or the 'south cove'—the madam has forgotten which, where a certain party carried our lady when they came from Europe, some years ago. To that cottage the madam is sure she will come, and she wrote me that, failing any clew in New York to go to the neighborhood of the cottage and wait. So you see in this case this trip covers both the madam's guess and my own. We will keep on the heels of this troupe until we are satisfied she is not in the party or following it; then we will shadow the cottage and wait for events."

The others shook their heads; they had no faith that success would wait upon either one of these theories, but they were mere hands not heads, and so obeyed.

Time wore on; one by one the passengers departed to their berths, until, finally, the Professor and one of the Silvio brothers—one of the proprietors of the troupe—were left upon the deck. The asking of a light for a cigar led the two into conversation; and, as the Professor was a genial gentleman, with fine conversational powers, which he exerted to their utmost in this case, having a purpose in view, he and the "showman" got on quite intimate terms.

Silvio, despite his name, was an Englishman—a man with very little education, but with much natural shrewdness, and with an intense longing for the society of men whose station he considered above his own. The Professor perceiving this was quick to improve the advantage. In a careless way he talked about his "bank" at Richmond, Virginia, and so from speaking of his own private affairs led the showman to talk of his, particularly as with all a lawyer's skill he led directly up to it. He said that he had always had a great wish to take an active part in theatrical affairs, and had often thought of buying an interest in some good troupe.

The showman, despite his shrewdness, jumped at the bait and swallowed it, hook and all, immediately.

An "angel," to use the cant term, with plenty of money to "back a show," is what all ambitious professionals hunger after. So, with an eye to the future, the man confided to the Professor that he and his brother did not find the means to run the present troupe, but that the third brother—the young, dark, Cuban-like fellow—did, and this third brother was no brother at all, but an outsider, who didn't want his real name known, and so called himself one of the De Silvios.

"Very common thing, you know," De Silvio explained, "for these rich young fellows, who come of good families, to keep their names secret, particularly when they are mixed up with a Black Crook kind of a show."

"Well, how did it happen that this young fellow should take a fancy to be connected with such an entertainment?" the Professor asked.

The showman laughed, then he whispered confidentially:

"Struck after one of the girls."

"Y."

"Fact! He heard somewhere that she was going with us, and he came to me and offered to take an interest in the trip. Of course he didn't say a word about being after the girl, but he mentioned her, and said that he understood she was going and that he thought she was a very excellent actress. I saw how the cat jumped at once, and as he talked business, put up a couple of hundred dollars and had plenty more back of it, we sold him a one-tenth interest."

A light suddenly flashed upon McDonald's brain; cunning as he thought himself it was more than probable that the woman was more cunning still. He had looked for her among the women; but was it not possible that she had outgeneraled him by assuming the disguise of a man? The men he had not noticed particu-

larly, neither had his satellites; all their attention had been directed to the female part of the troupe. He had noticed a slender boyish figure, foreign-looking in the face, and all wrapped up in a large ulster, but had hardly cast a second glance at the person, although at the time the thought had occurred to him that the face was familiar.

"And he is sweet upon Miss Pearl, eh?" he asked, determined to push the matter to the bottom.

"Oh, yes; I felt pretty sure of it at first, and I noticed to-night that he sat a little ways from her in the cabin and fairly ate her with his eyes."

"And, which is Miss Pearl?" The Professor asked the question because he was puzzled at the interest his prey took in the actress.

"She is the tall, handsome girl with the blonde hair and the bright blue eyes, who sat with another girl, Miss Bell, right at the head of the stairs before the boat started; then they went out onto the deck."

"Yes; I think I noticed her."

"I will introduce you to the gentleman, if you like."

"Thank you; I shall be delighted." But the Professor didn't intend that anything of the kind should occur. It was his game to keep out of sight until he was ready to spring upon his prey.

Their further conversation was of little importance, and soon they retired to rest. But, before he sought his couch the woman-hunter sought his two assistants and detailed to them his suspicions.

"Keep an eye upon this party!" was his parting injunction, "for it is a hundred to one that it is our bird!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRST NIGHT.

Now that he had a clew the Professor determined to pursue it diligently, so bribed the steward with a dollar to call him in the morning before the boat got into the dock. He would watch the disembarking passengers; if the young man who has assumed to be one of the De Silvio brothers was the woman in disguise he would be able to detect it now that he was on his guard.

McDonald fell asleep with a mind at ease, but if he had overheard a whispered conversation between the steward and one of the passengers which occurred right after his own interview with that official he would not have felt quite so comfortable.

The passenger occupied a state-room next to the Professor's. Through the open transom he had overheard their conversation, and the moment the Professor shut the door the passenger hastened to recall the steward, but took pains to ask the negro into the state-room so that no one could overhear what was said.

"I want to have a little joke on the old gentleman," the passenger explained, with a smile. "He is always boasting about getting up so early, and rather crowing over the rest of us; now if you could forget to call him in the morning I will give you a couple of dollars," and the young man jingled the silver pieces in his hand.

The eyes of the negro sparkled and a broad grin came over his face; three dollars in one night was indeed a windfall.

"Yes, sah; 'deed I kin!"

"You can say that you forgot to call him."

"Yes, sah; or I kin sw'ar dat I did call him, and dat he told me to go 'way and luff him sleep."

"Just as you please."

And the steward departed, rattling the silver dollars gleefully in his pocket, while the passenger threw himself upon his bunk.

"Oho, Professor! You ought to have put a beard over your mouth as well as your chin!" was the muttered scornful exclamation; "you needed to disguise your voice as well as your face."

So it happened in the morning that McDonald was not awakened before the boat was made fast to the dock, but, on the contrary, not until the passengers had disembarked.

The Professor was wrathful, and demanded to know why he had not been called, but the steward, with all innocence, disclaimed all knowledge of the affair, and protested that it must have been "de odder colored man, sah;" and, although McDonald felt certain that he had got hold of the right chap, yet there was no help for it, so, in a very angry mood, he quitted the boat to go immediately to the hotel, where the troupe had proceeded; so, confident in the security of his disguise, he walked into the hotel

office and registered, but no sight could he catch of the young man.

After breakfast he encountered the manager, whose acquaintance he had made on the boat, and took occasion to mention, in a careless way, that he had not had the pleasure of seeing the young man.

"He is not stopping here," De Silvio explained, "although his name is on the register. We always register all the party, and generally put in five or six dummy names besides, so as to make the country beaux, who come in to stare at the register, think that we have got an immense company. That is one of the tricks of the trade," he added, with a laugh.

"And where is he stopping?" McDonald asked.

"With some friends or relatives, I believe; from what he said, I understood he has some folks here who wouldn't be pleased if they knew he had anything to do with the show business; so he is going to keep quiet about it until we get to the next town."

"I thought I hadn't seen him this morning."

"Oh, he was here, and helped me to secure the rooms, and then he went away."

"I was looking forward to the pleasure of making his acquaintance. From what you said about him last night my curiosity was excited."

"Come up to the hall, to-night; he will probably be there, although he may not show up at all."

"All right; I will be there," and then the two separated.

A lurking suspicion had the Professor that there was more than accident in this, but how was it possible the bird could have learned of the spies upon his track?

The day passed, but neither McDonald nor his assistants found the slightest trace, though they searched high and low. Night came; the spies were early on the ground, as were also a large crowd of pleasure-seekers, but no young De Silvio.

The performance passed off well, but, despite the enjoyable nature of the entertainment, the Professor sat, figuratively speaking, on thorns. Had the prey again slipped through his fingers? Was he doomed, like the Irishman renowned in story, to be forever clutching at the bird to find that it wasn't a bird at all?

The play ended, the audience dispersed, but no young Silvio put in an appearance, so the spies returned to the hotel, and at last, after all the troupe had retired, the doctor and his satellites retreated from the field.

As the troupe were to stay two nights in New Haven, the Professor still hoped the young man might make his appearance; but this hope was a vain one. The next day and evening passed and he came not. That night the Professor retired, a beaten and disgusted man. His only chance, now, was in the little, almost forgotten seaside cottage down by the murmuring waves of the Sound.

A great surprise awaited him in the morning, though. He was up betimes, as was his habit, and was sitting in the office, reading a morning newspaper, when the elder De Silvio came down.

"Letter for you," said the clerk, giving him one, and the showman, as he tore it open, crossed to the window where McDonald was sitting, and nodded to him.

"Well, blast it! If this ain't a rum go!" cried De Silvio, as he perused the letter, unable to restrain his astonishment.

"Eh?" and the Professor looked up from his newspaper as if not understanding whether the remark was intended for his ears or not.

"Well, sir, it beats anything that I ever heard! You remember our 'angel,' the Cuban, that I was telling you about? Yes? Well, he has eloped with Miss Pearl; here's his letter explaining about it, but keep it dark, you know; it won't do to have it get out; but they have sloped, by thunder!"

CHAPTER XVI.

TANGLING IT UP.

THE Professor was not half so astonished at the affair as the manager of the troupe, for the elopement confirmed his suspicions. The Cuban was a woman disguised as a man; the girl was the magnet which had attracted his prey after the troupe, but—and now the Professor's able mind became confused—what bond of union was there between the actress and this mysterious woman? McDonald knew her life for twenty years back, and in that twenty years there appeared no clew to connect the one with the other. And now, in the name of reason and of common sense, how was it that she had induced the girl to fly with her?

And, while the Professor was wrestling with these problems, the manager on his part was struggling with another. Sara Pearl was the bright particular star of the troupe, and now that she was gone what would he do for another Stalacta? True, he had a plenty of good-looking, well-formed girls in the troupe, but not one of them was Sara Pearl with a metropolitan reputation.

"Dash the luck!" he cried, savagely; "the Boston managers will never stand it if I don't give them another Stalacta, just as good as Pearl—but where on earth am I to find her?"

At this moment the other brother came into the office, when the first one hastened to show him the letter, but he wouldn't believe it.

"It's a hoax!" he declared; "Sara Pearl is no such girl. I know her of old. She wouldn't do such a thing as to run off without giving us notice. We have treated her well; she has no cause of complaint and she wouldn't leave us in the lurch without a moment's warning; she is too honest for that."

The other brother looked doubtful; he hadn't much faith in women's honesty, particularly as far as the capricious ladies of the stage were concerned.

"Have you been up to her room yet, to see if she is really gone?" the younger one continued.

"No; I never thought of that. When I read the note written by our 'angel' I took it for granted that she had gone, of course."

"Take nothing for granted!" cried the other, impetuously, "and, as for that fellow, I never liked the looks of him; there was something sneaky and womanish about him, to my apprehension. Sara Pearl would never take up with such a fellow or else she ain't the kind of a girl I have always thought she was."

Then up-stairs, in hot haste to Miss Pearl's room, the two proceeded, and the Professor, as fully interested as the brothers, followed them.

Miss Pearl and Miss Bell roomed together—a blessing, as the elder De Silvio had remarked when he ascertained that the girls were not only willing but anxious so to do, for, as a rule with traveling troupes, every woman wants a room to herself; consequently there is a row at every hotel where such a thing is almost always an impossibility.

The younger brother knocked loudly at the door, but no one within the room stirred or answered.

"There; she has gone, sure enough!" the other brother exclaimed.

"Don't you be too sure of that; Miss Bell at least would be here."

"Perhaps she has gone with her," the other suggested; "they were thick as sisters."

"No, there's a key in the lock, inside, and the door is fastened," the other responded, trying the handle, and then he began a ferocious attack upon the door.

The noise this time succeeded in arousing some one within the room; footsteps were heard coming to the door, the key was turned in the lock, the door slightly opened, and the face of Sara Pearl appeared, but looking so dull and heavy that it could scarcely be recognized. She seemed like one laboring under the influence of a narcotic, for her eyes were dull and heavy, and her whole bearing listless and feeble.

"Eh, what's the matter—what is it?" she asked, evidently not recognizing the brothers outside.

"There, you see!" said the younger brother, winking to the elder: "Oh, it's all right, Miss Pearl; we only came to wake you up, that is all. We feared you would oversleep yourself."

"You are very kind. Oh, is it you, Mr. De Silvio?" she asked, suddenly recognizing the manager. "I don't know what has got into me this morning; I feel as sick as death—I can hardly stand up and my head aches so terribly; I don't know what can be the matter."

The managers expressed their sympathy, and one of them suggested that she had better call Miss Bell, for possibly she could do something for her.

"Yes, I will," she said, languidly, and she turned from the door. The next moment those without were startled by a cry of amazement from Sara's lips, and she flung open the door, widely; she had slipped on a loose morning-wrapper when she had been called, so that she was fit to be seen, though her glorious mass of beautiful blonde hair was all hanging down loose over her shoulders.

"My God! she is not here!" she cried.

And the three upon the threshold, pressing nearer, looked into the room.

As she had said—Helen Bell was not there! The only trace of her was the impress of her

head upon the pillow where she had lain by Sara's side.

A terrible conviction flashed instantly upon the brain of the bewildered girl.

"Oh, I understand it now!" she cried; "I have been drugged—drugged in my sleep, so that Helen could be stolen away! Do you not smell the odor of the drug, gentlemen, still lingering in the room?"

They did smell it; the scent was plain; the sickening perfume that comes from the sense-entrancing narcotic told its own story: Stalacta had been drugged—the Cuban had fled with Helen Bell instead of Sara Pearl! Helen evidently had drugged her friend so that she might be able to escape unobserved. But, what was the meaning of the wrong name in the Cuban's note? Was it possible that he did not know the difference between the two?

An open sheet of note-paper placed conspicuously upon the table attracted Sara's attention. Upon it were a few lines of writing. Miss Pearl caught it up and read it aloud:

"Good-by, dear; tell the landlord to keep my trunk until I send for it."

And that was all.

"There, you see; it's the same old story. She has eloped with our angel; here is his letter, but he wrote that it was *you* who was going," said the elder De Silvio.

In amazement Sara half-read the note, not noticing her own name therein.

"It is some deep and dark plot!" she exclaimed, full of excitement. "This looks something like her handwriting, but I am sure that it is not. I will not believe it!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A SELF-WILLED WOMAN.

MISS PEARL would not believe that Helen had eloped.

"It is impossible!" she kept on repeating. "It can't be! She would surely have confided in me. Why should she want to act secretly about the matter? There wasn't the least need of it. I wouldn't have thrown any obstacles in the way."

But the De Silvio brothers only laughed at this.

"How do you get over her letter?" asked the elder one.

"I do not believe she ever wrote it; it is an imitation of her hand, but it is *not* her writing."

"Well, that is an easy way of getting out of it; but how about this letter from the gentleman to us—is this a forgery, too?" And then he read the letter aloud.

"Miss Pearl!" the girl exclaimed, in amazement; "why, what on earth does he mean by saying Miss Pearl? I never even spoke to the man. I don't believe I would know him if I saw him."

"A mistake made in the hurry of writing, I suppose, or this young lady has been deceiving him for some purpose, and has made him believe that *her* name is Pearl."

"But, why on earth should she do such a thing?" asked Sara. "People don't do such things without reason."

"And now I think of it," chimed in the elder De Silvio, "when he proposed to take an interest in the show, he was very anxious that Miss Pearl should be engaged."

"Well, it's very funny that your brother should act so strangely," Sara observed, in wonder.

The two showmen laughed.

"He was no brother of ours," the younger one explained. "That was just a gag to keep people from finding out his real name. How do you know what has been going on in New York between these two? Women don't always trust each other. This fellow has evidently got plenty of money, and it is a big thing for the girl."

"But, why didn't she stay in New York then? What did she want to come out on this trip for, and then run away in this manner?"

"Oh, you must ask me some easier question," the man answered, shrugging his shoulders. "Perhaps he didn't come to time in the right way—perhaps he wasn't willing to do what the lady wanted; she may have demanded certain things, a settlement of so much money upon her, or—"

"For shame!" the actress cried, indignantly. "Helen Bell was no such girl; and besides, there was a very good reason why she would *not* have run away with this fellow."

"What reason?" asked the elder brother, his curiosity excited.

Sara felt that she had said too much; her reason, too, was but a suspicion, although, woman-like, she was certain that it was correct.

"It doesn't matter; I know," she replied, evasively.

"Well, we'll have to put one of the other girls in for her part, and you had better get dressed. We leave at ten-thirty, you know."

"But, ain't you going to do anything about this matter?" demanded Miss Pearl, in amazement.

"Do anything about it—how?" asked the elder De Silvio.

"Why, put the police on the track! I have been drugged!"

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if you are right, but I guess you can thank your friend for that; she tried a little chloroform on you so that she could get away without trouble; perhaps she had an idea that you might object."

And closing the door, the two walked off, followed by the Professor, who now believed that he held the clues to this mystery.

"Oh, I'm only a woman, and I don't know what I am talking about, of course!" cried Sara, passionately. "That poor child has been abducted by somebody. She has always been so quiet about her past life that I had a suspicion there might be something mysterious about it. I'll dress and then consult the chief of police, at once."

And the girl was as good as her word; she hurried on her things, and without a word to anybody hurried out. She proceeded directly to the principal street and accosting the first policeman she saw was directed to the office of the chief of the police, and in five minutes more was in the office. The official was a pleasant-mannered gentleman, and knowing the actress, having witnessed the performance on the previous evening, at once asked how he could oblige her.

Sara gave a history of the whole affair; the chief looked grave, asked a few questions, and then shook his head.

The girl's heart sunk within her. By his face she guessed that he did not see any way to act in the matter.

"What is to be done?" she asked, almost in despair, as she concluded.

"Well, really, miss, I don't exactly see; of course there are some suspicious circumstances about the affair;" in his own mind he didn't think there were. He had not the best possible opinion of actresses, particularly those who traveled with entertainments of the Black Crook order, and as he believed the managers of such shows knew a great deal more about their actresses than he possibly could know, if they were convinced that it was an elopement, pure and simple, and nothing else, why, the chances were great they were correct in their supposition.

"Yes, yes," Sara cried, eagerly, "and do you not think if you put your detectives upon the case they might be able to find out the perpetrator of this outrage, for I am sure it is not an elopement, but an abduction. She was drugged—I was drugged, and then she was taken away!"

Now this view of the matter was entirely too much for the official. To his acute mind it seemed like a leaf torn out of one of the "blood and thunder" novels, for the average man believes that fiction always surpasses truth, blind to the fact that police and law courts daily reveal glimpses of tragedies, far excelling in wonderful strangeness all the tales that human mind can invent. Truth is stranger than fiction, despite the current belief that it is not. And then, too, his visitor talked about his detectives as if he was the police chief of the metropolis with a small army of spies at his beck and call. So again he shook his head, but in order to smooth the matter over said, blandly:

"I don't really see how I can interfere in the case. You see, miss, according to your statement there is nothing for us to work on—I mean, officially, but privately, to oblige you. I will put one of our best men on quietly, and see what he can do. If he gains any information I will let you know."

The actress thanked the chief, although in her heart she did not believe the search would be productive of any good results. It did not require the skill of a prophet to see that the official believed it was an elopement and not an abduction.

The chief inquired in regard to where the troupe would be during the next week, put down the towns and the dates, and then politely bowed the lady out.

"And now, what on earth shall I do?" muttered Sara, as she walked slowly back to the hotel. "If I can't interest the chief in my story, who can I interest?" Then, suddenly, she thought of Gordon Mallory! There was a

love affair between the young actor and the missing girl, she was sure, although both concealed it well. But, Sara had a woman's eye in matters of this kind, and was confident she was not mistaken. And this, if for no other reason, was why Helen had not eloped. She felt sure from what she had known of the country girl that money would have no weight with her at all where matters of the heart were concerned. If any one would take an interest in the matter Gordon Mallory was the man, and so, when she arrived at the hotel she at once asked for the young actor.

She found him, and he was already in possession of the full details, but when she asked what he was going to do about it, he simply replied by asking what he could do!

This question was a difficult one to answer, and Sara was obliged to confess that she really didn't know, but she thought that something ought to be done.

Mallory fully agreed with her, but, as he said, he did not see any way in which he could do anything.

Sara wept—tears born of rage, commingled with vexation and pity.

"Oh, if I was only a man!" she cried, as the train moved out of the New Haven depot; but, what she would have done if she had been of the masculine gender she neglected to state.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW IT WAS DONE.

It was about three o'clock in the morning, the hour when sleep is deepest. The Black Crook troupe reposed dreamlessly, tired out after their night's exertions. Only one person was astir—and he moved, like a specter, silently through the halls, as if anxious not to disturb the sleepers. The look upon his face, the features of which were dimly visible by the misty light of the down-turned gas, revealed murderous thoughts if ever a face did. There were two staircases in the hotel, the main one used by the guests and a small rear one leading to the back yard for the convenience of the servants of the house.

Down this back way the figure stole. The staircase ended in a broad entry, at the end of which was a door leading into the yard in the rear of the hotel. To unlock and unbolt the door was but a moment's work.

Through the door the man glided, then from the yard into the street. A short distance up the street a doctor resided. Quite a large garden surrounded his residence, and at its rear was the physician's stable.

Opening the carriage gate the night-prowler proceeded directly to the stable. The door, secured by a common padlock, was easily opened by one of a large bunch of keys with which the silent visitor was provided. Soon the doctor's nag, a sober gray beast, was carefully led from its stall to be deftly harnessed, and then attached to the buggy. This accomplished, the horse was led through the yard into the street and then around into the hotel yard, halting it at the back door.

Then again into the hotel the slight figure passed, to steal softly up the stairs and halt at the door of the room occupied by the two girls. There he listened attentively. The breathing of the sleepers within could plainly be distinguished.

The transom over the door was quite large enough to admit the body of the night-prowler. Mounting upon the knob of the door he was quickly inside the room, and with steps as noiseless as the footfalls of a cat, he stole to the bed wherein the two girls slept side by side.

From his pocket he drew a vial and a couple of sponges, and a strong, pungent odor stole out upon the air as he poured some of the liquid of the vial upon the sponges, first taking the precaution, however, to unlock the door, evidently with the idea of being able to escape without detection in case the girl should happen to wake while he was applying the narcotic.

Then the sponges were held close to the nostrils of the sleepers.

Bound as they were in slumber's chain it was impossible for them to resist, and, although sleeping nature struggled for a few moments against the outrage, the subtle power of the drug prevailed, and soon both of them relapsed into insensibility.

The dark water-proof cloak of Miss Bell lay upon a chair near at hand; this the intruder wrapped around the form of the sleeping girl; then with dextrous hands he gathered the wearing apparel upon the sofa and rolled it up into a bundle, not even neglecting to put in the stockings and shoes.

Pen and ink and a few sheets of paper were

upon the table, where they had been left by Miss Pearl, after writing to a friend in New York, the evening before.

Evidently the visitor had calculated upon everything, for without a moment's hesitation he sat down to the table and hurriedly penned the brief note, which the Silvio brothers had so willingly accepted as proof that the girl had eloped with their "angel."

This task completed, then with a strength that none would have believed dwelt within the slender form of the stripling, the intruder swung the senseless form of the drugged girl over his shoulder, took up the bundle in his hand and made his way from the house into the yard. Depositing the bundle on the floor of the buggy he propped the girl up in the seat, so that she looked as if she was sleeping; then he returned to the hotel, ascended again to the room whose privacy he had violated, locked the door upon the inside, and, agile as a cat, gained the entry again by way of the transom. Never had an enterprise been more skillfully or successfully carried out.

But, like all cunning people, the intruder did too much. If the girl had fled with a lover in the night, as he intended every one should believe, she could not possibly have locked the door from the inside, and, woman though she was, Miss Pearl had not neglected to notice and mention this fact, which a shrewd and skillful detective would have seized upon as a sure proof that no elopement but a cunning-planned abduction had taken place, but the girl's assertions were not believed. Every one thought she was mistaken, and that the door was unlocked, but, in her agitation and bewilderment, that she herself had relocked it when she had been summoned.

Taking his place in the buggy beside his unconscious victim, the perpetrator of this remarkable outrage drove off.

Between the hours of three and four in the morning there is very little life in the streets of a quiet, provincial city. It was quite dark and the carriage passed out of the town without attracting any notice whatever.

The moment he was without the city limits, the driver applied the whip, furiously, and after a sharp drive of about three-quarters of an hour halted in front of a little cottage, only a short distance from the waters of Long Island Sound, much to the relief of the doctor's nag, who was not at all used to such rapid work, for its owner, though a medical man, and often in a hurry, was one of the most careful of drivers.

The cottage was situated in an isolated position, not another house being within sight. It was all overgrown with creeping vines, and the little garden in front resembled a jungle in its wildness, for bushes and briars, and young pine trees had sprung up and were all struggling for the mastery. Nature, protesting against the encroachment of civilization, had almost won her own again, and had about destroyed all vestiges of the once trim little garden.

The blinds of the house were tightly closed. The spiders had festooned the porch and doorway with their filmy snares, and all appearances, around and about the place, told of desolation and decay.

The abductor halted the carriage in the middle of the road, and then assuming the weight of the girl upon his shoulder, passed around the house, through the open ground which surrounded it, and entered the rear yard, through a gap in the fence, to make his way into the house through the back-door, which was unlocked.

The house was completely furnished; everything was in its place, and in order; but there was that almost indescribable musty smell about the place, inseparable from unused houses, particularly those completely furnished.

As said, the blinds were all closed, thus shutting out the blessed light of the sun, so the interior was plunged in Egyptian darkness. But, that did not seem to make any difference with the bearer of the helpless girl. With confident steps he ascended to the second story and entered one of the back rooms, a sleeping apartment, which was fitted up in luxurious style; it was a woman's boudoir, evidently, for a hundred little knick-knacks were scattered around it, and the cut-glass cologne bottles were even still on the dressing-stand.

Upon the luxurious bed, all completely made up, seeming to invite repose, the abductor deposited his lovely burden; then he returned to the carriage and brought in the bundle; and, locking all the doors securely behind him, the mysterious abductor returned to the buggy, got in and drove back to the city.

An hour later horse and buggy were in the doctor's stable. The deed was done.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STRANGE STORY.

As the potent fumes of the chloroform at length spent their power the abducted girl awoke to a knowledge of her position.

Slowly and feebly she opened her eyes, for the dose which had been administered was a terrible one, almost enough to conquer life itself, and it was only by a violent struggle that nature won the victory.

In astonishment the girl looked around her; though half-stupefied she could not help at once noticing the difference between the plainly-furnished room which she had occupied at the hotel in common with Sara Pearl, and the elegantly fitted-up sleeping apartment in which she now reposed.

True, the peculiar musty, sickening smell, which reminded one so much of a charnel-house, was plainly perceptible, despite the fact that pastilles had been burnt until their aromatic perfume hung in cloudlike rings of blue smoke in the air, and a cheerful fire burnt in the open grate stove which sat in the fire-place.

"What did it mean?" the girl asked. By what magic had the faded carpet, the old hair-cloth chairs, the dingy window curtains, and the general forlorn look of the hotel sleeping apartment been changed for Brussels carpet, silk-covered chairs, a bed fit for a queen and an air of luxury that would not have been amiss in an emperor's palace?

At first the girl could hardly believe that she was awake; it seemed so like the fantasy of a dream.

She was not alone; a female sat by the window, nestled in the embraces of an elaborately-cushioned rocking-chair; a book was in her hands, but her eyes were not upon the printed page but wandering restlessly out upon the fair view of the swelling waters of the Sound that the window commanded.

Naturally at the first glance, the actress took the form to be that of Sara Pearl, her roommate, although how she and Sara had come into this splendid apartment was a mystery, but, as she moved uneasily in the bed to get a better view of her surroundings, the other rose and at once advanced to the side of the couch.

Then Helen saw that it was not Sara but a stranger—a tall, stately woman, dressed completely in black, with a really beautiful face, although it bore evident marks of care and anxiety; but one strange thing about the woman was the fact that her hair, which was a rich golden yellow in color, was cut off quite short, cut fully as short as a boy's is usually worn.

"Are you better, dear?" the woman asked, kindly, standing by the bedside and gazing down upon the girl with a very strange, peculiar look upon her face.

And then, as Helen looked up into the face of the woman an odd idea came into her mind. The woman was a stranger; she knew that she never had seen her before, and yet it seemed as if she had.

A conflict was going on in her mind. Reason said, "You have never seen this face before!" Fancy replied, "Oh, yes, I have, often!"

The girl closed her eyes for a moment; it was as if she was wrestling with the influence of a horrid dream; never before had she experienced such a strange feeling. Of course the influence of the drug still clung to her, although she was ignorant of the strange events which had occurred.

"What is the matter? 'Where am I?' Helen demanded, sitting upright in the bed.

"You have received a severe shock, dear, and you have been ill for quite a time. You rose in your sleep in the hotel in New Haven and wandered out into the hall, and then, in the darkness, you fell down the stairway. My room—I happened to be stopping at the hotel that night on the way to my home here—was right at the foot of the stairs and your fall awoke me. I rushed out to find you insensible in the hall. The doctor who was called said that you were threatened with brain-fever—as you had received the whole shock upon your head—so when I found that you were a member of the troupe and that you would be left behind until you got well, I concluded not to trust you to the mercies of the hotel folks but had you brought down here to my country-house, where I could nurse you into health again."

"Oh, you are very kind, madam!" the girl exclaimed, gratefully, never for a single instant doubting the truth of the story.

"Do not attempt to sit up too long," the lady said, busying herself by arranging the pillows so that the girl could repose more comfortably in a half-reclining position.

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days."

"And I have not been sensible all that time?"

"No, dear."

"How strange it is," the girl murmured, thoughtfully, "for it seems as if it was only last night that I retired to rest."

"When the brain is disordered we do not take account of time."

"Very true."

Never was there an imposture more complete; not a single doubt did the girl have. Her head ached from the effects of the drug, and naturally she felt faint and ill.

"You are very kind," she continued, slowly. "I fear that I never shall be able to repay you for this goodness to a stranger."

"Not exactly a stranger, my dear," replied the other, with a pleasant smile, and then she moved the rocking-chair over and sat down by the bedside.

Helen looked at her for a moment in a puzzled sort of way.

"Not exactly a stranger," the other repeated.

"Your face does seem familiar to me, and yet the remembrance is more like the fantasy of a dream than anything else," the girl remarked, thoroughly puzzled.

"I knew your family in England a great many years—more years than I should care to own to, for to do so would be to make myself out quite an old woman," and the speaker smiled; but to the girl, despite the pleasant face of the woman, there was something odd and uncanny about the smile, and a restless spirit—good perhaps, and perhaps evil—seemed to be lurking in the depths of the full blue eyes.

As the fumes of the drug were more completely neutralized the mind of the girl began to work with its accustomed clearness.

The statement of the lady seemed to her wonderful, for, how on earth was it possible that any one—a stranger, too—could know anything about her or her family? But the presumption came at once to her mind that the lady was laboring under a mistake, misled by her false stage name—a doubt which the other seemed to fathom.

"You question the correctness of my statement," she observed, the same peculiar smile upon her face which had so unpleasantly affected the young girl before.

"I think you must have made some mistake, madam," Helen admitted.

"Oh, no; I recognized you by your resemblance to your family. I was not deceived by your stage name. Although I know very little of the theatrical life, yet I am aware that a great many of the player-people assume false names; of course there is no particular harm in it. Those brave enough to dare the glare of a public life can hardly be blamed for wishing to in part hide themselves behind a mask. I know what your true name is; it is a good old English family appellation, and although not as pretty perhaps as your fanciful stage name, yet to my mind is far better. I recognized you the instant you appeared on the stage as Miss Sara Pearl."

"Sara Pearl!" the girl exclaimed, in amazement; "why, that is not my name. I am not Sara Pearl; my name is Helen Bell!"

The lady contracted the pupils of her eyes in a very peculiar way for a moment, and then she laughed outright.

"Well, that is a blunder; but, Sara Pearl or Helen Bell, you cannot deny that your right name is neither the one nor the other, but Halah Kunibell."

CHAPTER XX.

A BIT OF FAMILY HISTORY.

HER true name coming from the lips of the strange lady astounded the girl. And, too, she must be speaking the truth when she had said that she was acquainted with her family.

"You are willing to acknowledge then that your name is Halah Kunibell?" the woman remarked, after a pause.

"Oh, yes; why should I deny it? I am not ashamed of the life that I have chosen, although by advice of one who was well acquainted with the stage I assumed another name."

The lady, although her eyes were fixed upon the face of the girl, was evidently paying but little attention to what she was saying.

"I knew your sister, once—your sister Hada; where is she? Is she living? What has become of her?" she cried, abruptly, her naturally sweet voice suddenly becoming harsh and mechanical.

"My sister Hada!" the actress cried, in

amazement. "Why, I never had a sister by that name!"

"No sister Hada?" and the lady bent her brows and almost scowled at the girl; so fierce was the expression upon her face, and so wild the look, that a slight sentiment of fear crept over Helen.

"No, not to my knowledge."

"How strange that they should deceive you and keep all knowledge of the unfortunate Hada from you!" the woman muttered, her tone angry and her mind evidently full of bitter thoughts.

"Did I really have a sister named Hada?" asked the girl, her curiosity excited.

"Yes, a sister about twenty years older than you are, I should judge; you are about twenty, are you not?"

"Yes."

"And where are your father and mother?"

"Both dead," replied Helen.

"Judge not, lest ye be judged!" exclaimed the lady, in a strange, mechanical sort of way.

"They judged—judged harshly, not wisely; and now—well, the great book of mysteries is open to them, and they can tell whether they judged well or ill. But, how came you to come to this country? Surely it was a long journey for a young girl all alone—that is, if you came alone."

"I came with my father and mother when I was a child."

"What?" cried the woman, with startling earnestness, "did Sabban Kunibell and his wife come to America?"

"Yes."

"And they died here?"

"Yes."

"How long ago was it when they came, and when did they die?"

"They came when I was a child, seventeen or eighteen years ago; mother died first, and father only a few months ago."

"That accounts for it," the lady muttered, in her strange way. "Hada was your father's daughter, but she displeased him and they parted," she continued, addressing herself directly to the girl. "There was bad blood between them; not all Hada's fault, either, for though she was wild and willful and loved her own way, yet she was good at heart and dearly loved her parents. She came to this country, and when years passed on her heart softened to the parents with whom she had quarreled, and she wrote to them. The letters were never answered, I presume because they were never received, for the father, by your statement, was in America at the time; but evidently it mattered not, for since Sabban Kunibell suffered you to grow up in ignorance of your elder sister the angry feeling which he had for his willful child did not die out with the lapse of years. The quarrel between the father and daughter was a bitter one. She had chosen a certain path in life and was determined to walk in it; he, on the contrary, was determined that she should not, and with bitter emphasis he told her that if she persisted in her determination, from the time she quitted his house she would cease to be his daughter, and that as long as he lived he would never acknowledge her as a child. The daughter fully as proud, as haughty and as stubborn as the father, answered him in kind. She had chosen her way and she would walk in it, regardless of consequences. And she was as good as her word. But when years passed, and the hot blood of youth became cooled by age and experience, better feelings prevailed, and the disobedient daughter, repentant of her folly, would have become reconciled to her parents, but fate had willed it otherwise."

The woman bent down her head and fell into a fit of musing, while the young actress watched with wondering eyes. Strange thoughts were in her mind. Who was this woman, who, seemingly, was so well acquainted with her family history? and was it really true that she had had an elder sister, Hada? The name was an odd Biblical one like her own. Her father had a strange fancy for such names, too. His name was Sabban, her mother's Rachel; so Biblical names seemed to run in the family.

There seemed to be truth in her story, for she had described her father's character exactly; although one of the kindest of men yet he was implacably stubborn when his mind was made up; and now as she recalled events there came to her recollection strange speeches which had escaped from her mother at times—speeches which had puzzled her since, for she could not comprehend what they meant; but now that she had gained a knowledge of the existence of an elder sister, it was evident the speeches referred to her. The heart of the mother sorrowed for her first born and refused to be com-

forted. Other strange thoughts, too, were in the girl's mind. If this stranger knew so much about her family was it not likely that she might know the reason why her father had so carefully secluded himself from all the world?

The young actress hesitated to put the question; she shrunk from revealing, even to this well-informed stranger, that there was a mystery in her family which baffled her efforts to penetrate.

Second thoughts told her, too, that, if the lady did not know that her father had come to America it would not be likely she would know anything about the causes which led him to take the step, for the girl was sure that the mystery which surrounded her parents' life had its rise in England and not in this country.

One question, though, she burned to ask, and she took advantage of her companion's waking from her reverie to propound it.

"Is my sister Hada alive?" she asked, slowly and with a timid air. It was the most natural question in the world under the circumstances, and yet, there was a subtle instinct in the girl's nature which warned her that the question would not be a pleasant one.

"Alive?" cried the woman, in a loud voice, a baleful light shining in her eyes; "no, no! She could not live! She died long years ago, and that is what has wrecked all my life. If Hada Kuntbell had lived I would be a far different woman to-day from what I now am; but, I do not blame you, girl, although you are of her race," she hastened to add, perceiving a look of apprehensive wonder upon Helen's face. "You knew nothing about it; you had not made your appearance in this world then. Oh, girl, girl! if you only knew the misery that your sister caused me! It is enough to make a statue weep tears of blood—rich, warm, red blood!"

The face of the woman became convulsed, and she wrung her hands together as if torn by fearful agony.

Helen was really alarmed for it seemed as if she was about to go into hysterics.

But, to the scene came a sudden interruption.

The door opened quickly, without the slightest warning, disclosing three men, who immediately advanced into the room. The woman sprang to her feet and cast a rapid glance at the window, as if she meditated an escape, but the foremost intruder held up his finger, warningly.

"Do not try that, madam!" he exclaimed; "it is useless."

For moment the woman glared defiantly into his face, but the firm and steady look of his eyes seemed to quell her rebellious spirit, for slowly she dropped her gaze to the floor.

"What is the meaning of this? Why have you brought this young lady here?" he asked, after the victory was won, and he cast an inquisitive glance at the young girl.

The reader has probably suspected who the three men were. Like bloodhounds on the scent the Professor and his followers had tracked the prey; but, like the hunter, who, knowing the den of the fox, hies straightway there without troubling himself to follow the animal through all his devious windings, after the chase begins, so the Professor, satisfied that his game would seek the secluded cottage, came there and surprised the inmates as we have described.

"One of my whims, that is all," the woman replied, sullenly.

"Are you acquainted with this lady?" he asked, addressing the actress.

"No, sir; I never saw her until this morning," Helen answered, wondering what it all meant.

"Well, you have sustained no harm, so there isn't much mischief done. I will send a carriage for you to take you to the depôt. The troupe have gone on to Meriden, and as there has been no real injury done I trust you will not mention the affair any more than you can help."

And then the three men and the lady departed, leaving the young actress a prey to the greatest wonderment.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RELEASE.

IN vain did Helen rack her brains for some solution of this strange affair; none came; and when the carriage arrived to take her away, some two hours later, exactly as the stranger had said, she was still completely in the dark.

She had dressed herself and was sitting by the window when the vehicle drove up, eagerly awaiting its arrival. She had been al-

most afraid to attempt to get up, her head felt so strangely, and she was apprehensive that her strength would fail her, but, to her astonishment, upon getting up, she found that, instead of being weak, she was fully as strong as ever. This was a source of great amazement to her, for, of course, she fully believed the story in regard to her illness.

The carriage sent was a buggy drawn by a single horse, and driven by the Irishman.

The actress recognized the man immediately as being one of the three who had departed only a little while before with the lady who had talked and acted so mysteriously.

"From this person I shall probably be able to find out what all this means," she murmured, as she descended the stairs. And, as she made her way from the house, it occurred to her that it was very singular she did not encounter any one; the house seemed deserted.

"Jump in, miss!" the Irishman exclaimed, as she made her appearance at the open door. "Jump in, and I'll have yees to the depôt in mighty quick time."

The girl obeyed the injunction; the driver applied the whip, and off went the horse at a brisk trot.

Helen was amazed when she looked around her and saw that she was in the country. She had no idea, of course, that she had been carried from the city.

"How sick I must have been," she remarked, "to have been carried all this distance, and yet not to know anything about it."

The driver pursed up his lips, but did not speak.

The actress looked at him for a moment; she was meditating how to frame the questions which she intended to put, but the Irishman was not deficient in shrewdness, and, by the expression upon the girl's face, he guessed what was passing in her mind.

"You mustn't ask me any questions, miss, if you please," he hastened to say, thus anticipating the girl's purpose. "It is my business to drive yees to the depôt, but not to answer any questions. The gentleman what hires me told me to be after kaping a still tongue in me head, and as he remarked, miss, 'least said the soonest mended.' If yees do be after wanting to talk about the country, or the illigant weather, or this beautiful baste of a horse, I'm your man, but no questions, do ye mind!" and the speaker, as he finished, shook his head as much as to indicate that he was granite itself as far as this resolution was concerned.

"There is only one question that I am anxious to ask," the girl replied.

"Bedad! perhaps that wan may be as bad as ten!"

"I am sure it cannot displease or give offense to any one, if you answer it."

"Faix! whether that is to be so or not I kin tell better when I hear the question."

"Undoubtedly; but it is a very simple one, and you need not answer it if you do not choose, or if you think by answering you will displease your employer."

"That is fair enough, anyhow; so fire away wid it!"

"What day of the week is this?"

The Irishman looked at his companion in perfect astonishment.

"Oh, come, now, miss; it's making game of me, ye are!"

"Indeed, I am not; I am in sober earnest," the girl protested.

"And don't ye know?"

"No, sir. I do not!"

"Why, it's Wednesday."

"Wednesday!" the actress cried, in amazement; "and have I been sick and out of my head for a whole week?"

"What in the name of goodness are you talking about? Shure! I saw you play on the stage in the Black Crook last night."

"Last night!" Helen was amazed. "Why, that lady said I had been sick and out of my mind for some time."

The Irishman indulged in a low whistle, which was clearly indicative of great astonishment.

"Oh, the born divil!" he muttered, under his breath.

"Then she deceived me, and I have not been ill long, and it was last night that I played at the New Haven Opera House?"

"Yis; I was there meself."

"But why was this deceit practiced upon me?" demanded Helen, in amazement not unmixed with indignation.

"Aha, miss, now you come to the questions you see, and I gave you warning, fair and aisy, that I couldn't answer. But if I can't answer

the questions I can give you a bit of advice, and if ye are the sinsible lady that I think ye are, yees may be after taking it!" the driver remarked, impressively. "Don't say a word about this affair to anybody. Take the advice of the ould gintleman, my master, and I've the matter drop jist where it is; it will do ye no good to be curious, and maybe it may bring harm to some wan else."

"But, all this is very mysterious, and I do not understand it at all!" the girl could not help exclaiming.

"True for yees, miss! Shure! there's a hape of queer things in this world; but the best way to get along quiet and aisy is never to mind them the last bit, at all, at all."

The more the young actress pondered the more puzzled she became, but knowing that she would not get any more explanation from her companion she held her peace.

It did not take long to reach the depôt, and as it happened the Meriden train was in waiting.

"There's your train now, miss," exclaimed the driver, after they had alighted from the carriage; "you had better hurry right on board, miss, for it will be off in a minute. I have the ticket for yees."

And so, almost before she knew it, she found herself seated in the car. The bell rung, the conductor's "All aboard!" was shouted, and then the Irishman placed a sealed envelope in the girl's hand.

"Your ticket's inside, miss; good-by, ma'am!" and he hurried from the car, jumping off just as the train moved away.

Decidedly bewildered by all these strange circumstances our country girl opened the envelope, which was addressed to Miss Helen Bell. As the man had said, there was a railroad ticket inside, and with the ticket there was a note. She opened it and a twenty-dollar bill dropped out into her lap. The note, short and very much to the point, read as follows:

"MISS BELL: Inclosed please find twenty dollars as a slight recompense for the trouble to which you have been put, and the writer of these lines will take it as a favor if you will keep the matter a profound secret, as the publication of your adventure cannot possibly do you any good, and will most certainly do harm both to yourself and others."

There was no signature to this note, which was written in a firm, clerical hand.

Altogether the whole affair was a most astonishing one, and the more the girl reflected upon it the more bewildered she became. The twenty dollars she would not have accepted if she could have helped herself, but she couldn't very well return it at present, yet she made up her mind that she would do so at some future time if she ever had the chance.

Her train was only an hour later than the one on which the troupe had traveled, and being an "express," while the other was an "accommodation," she arrived in Meriden while the troupe were still at the depôt.

There had been a mistake in regard to the hotels. The one which had contracted to take the party discovered that it would not be able to spare rooms enough to entertain them all; so the managers were forced to skirmish round to provide abiding for those members who could not be kept at the principal house, and pending these negotiations all the party remained at the depôt.

So, the first persons Miss Bell encountered upon descending from the cars were Sara Pearl and Gordon Mallory.

"I knew you would come!" Sara cried, eagerly, rushing forward to take her friend by the hand.

"Yes, I came as soon as I could; but, oh, Sara, I have had such an adventure!" Helen exclaimed.

"And you didn't go off with that fellow?"

"Go off with who?" The young actress was amazed.

Sara produced both of the letters, the one written to the manager by the false De Silvio, and the few lines left in the sleeping apartment.

"Come into the waiting-room where they can't stare at us so," Sara said, drawing her friend toward the door.

In the waiting-room, which was comparatively free from people, there was a full and free explanation between the two girls; and Sara, better acquainted with the world than the other, speedily guessed the truth.

"We were both chloroformed; then you were abducted, and if it hadn't been for those men coming as they did, you can depend upon it that that rascal of a Cuban would soon have made his appearance!" Sara exclaimed.

Shrewd of wit as the actress certainly was,

yet it was not within the range of human wisdom for her to guess that the lady and the Cuban were one and the same, nor could she in the least explain the mystery of the three men, but her counsel in regard to the twenty-dollar bill was eminently practical.

"Return it! Not by a good sight, my dear! It was given to you freely; you keep it, or if you feel any compunctions about so doing, hand it over to me. I haven't received anything to pay me for what I had to suffer."

And this was the end of the incomprehensible adventure, but stranger ones yet were in store for the ambitious country girl.

CHAPTER XXII.

"WESTWARD, HO!"

THE De Silvio troupe had prospered, and from the Eastern circuit, as it is called, had passed down into the South as far as Texas; then it had come up into the West, and in the springtime, when we again take up the thread of our story, the party had reached the city of Cincinnati, Ohio, for a week's sojourn.

Cincinnati, "the Paris of America," as it is proudly termed by its inhabitants, is an excellent theatrical city, especially for attractions of the Black Crook order, and all of the troupe looked forward to a prosperous week's business.

The Eastern members of the company, though, who were not used to the way in which theatricals are served up in some of the Western cities in certain opera-houses, were somewhat astonished at the sight which they beheld when the curtain rose on their first performance. As the disgusted low comedian of the party remarked—by the way, he looked exactly like a minister, having a gloomy, solemn face, dressing always in complete black, and seldom being seen to smile—"Hang me if every man-Jack out in front ain't anchored to a beer-mug!"

And it was true: nearly all the audience were drinking beer, and those who were not drinking were smoking, and so, when the curtain went up, there was still another curtain of blue smoke between the audience and the actors.

All this wasn't a very pleasant thing for the Eastern artists, and they were naturally disgusted; but the house was crowded with people, who were enthusiastic in their applause, and after the actors got used to the smoke and the beer it didn't seem so bad. It was the German beer-garden system over again—husband and wife and all the children, drinking beer and enjoying the performance.

But, it was a terrible blow to our ambitious girl; and in the solitude of her apartment, after the performance was over that first night, Helen freed her mind of the load which had been weighing upon it.

"Sara, do you think I have improved any since we started from New York?" she asked.

"Oh, yes; improved wonderfully; your voice, face and figure were always good, of course, but you didn't know how to get on or off the stage properly, or how to use your arms; all that is changed now, and though you have only been on the stage five months you have progressed as far as most people do in five years."

"Our season ends next week in Chicago, and as far as I am concerned I will never have anything more to do with such a troupe as this one. You get a large salary, Sara, more than you could probably get in regular lines, but I have received a very small one, and now that I have made a name, and am known as an actress, I do not see why I cannot do better than I am doing now."

"I tell you what it is, dear, start a combination; go out as a star, with a company to support you; take the bull right by the horns! You want to play Juliet, and such parts, and you are fitted to them, too; who knows but what you might make a success right from the beginning?"

"But, I hav'n't money enough; besides, I don't understand how to manage a combination, and I shrink from the responsibility."

"Oh, that is easily enough arranged. Advertise for a manager with money to take you out. I don't see why you can't find an 'angel' to supply the funds as well as any one else. I will go with you, and I'm a pretty good business woman; I will see that you are treated right."

The prospect did look feasible; and oh, what a vision it opened to the girl's eyes!

"I will do it!" she exclaimed, coming to a sudden determination. "If I succeed I will realize my ambitious hopes, and if I fail—"

"In the bright lexicon of youth which fate reserves for a glorious manhood, there is no such word as fail," Sara quoted.

So the attempt was determined upon and the advertisement relating to it was sent to one of the dramatic newspapers.

"An angel! my kingdom for an angel!" Sara went "spouting" around at odd times.

But before the angel made his appearance the actress was destined to encounter a gentleman who much more resembled a denizen of the lower world than the upper.

A party of gentlemen had occupied the lower right-hand box from the stage, on the opening night of the troupe, and one of them, a stout, florid-faced person of middle age, evidently had been impressed with Miss Bell, and had taken a great deal of pains to let the lady know it. He had, too, improved the opportunity afforded by the box being near the stage to remark to his companions, when Miss Bell came upon the stage, that she was the prettiest girl he had seen for a long time, and he took care to speak in a tone plainly audible to the actress's ears. But five months of the stage life had made Helen pretty well used to this sort of thing. She had learned that, when a woman dares the glare of the footlights, she exposes herself to the attentions of all the fools who frequent theaters. In New York, at Niblo's, she had received notes by the score, some of them couched in polite terms, some impudent, and some verging upon insult. Flowers and jewelry, too, accompanied the letters.

Sara's counsel was invaluable in these matters, for every day she was subjected to just such attentions, which were seldom agreeable—in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred were decidedly disagreeable, and sometimes extremely annoying.

"Keep the flowers and send back the presents," she said. "Although in regard to the latter part of the advice, perhaps I am a little too particular. I know quite a number who don't return the presents. If the fellows are stupid enough to send them, why then the quicker they learn that there is a great deal of truth in the old adage, 'A fool and his money are soon parted,' the better."

"But, surely, they would not wear jewelry so obtained!" Helen had exclaimed, in horror.

"Oh, no; for, if they did, that would give the maker of the gift a chance to improve the opportunity. No, they quietly sell the trash and put the money in their pockets."

Our young actress would not do this; but, even returning the presents did not damp the ardor of some foolish young men, and she had been followed home from the theater more times than she had fingers and toes, and even spoken to, but no man ever had tried this twice, for the manner in which the young girl had repelled the impudent advance was something grand.

And so, as we have said, grown used to this sort of persecution, which all actresses are doomed to encounter, more or less, Helen paid no more attention to the remark or to the man who made it than if he had never existed.

But the next night the man was in the box again, this time alone, but with a profusion of costly bouquets with which he literally pelted the actress.

Of course every time a bouquet was flung the audience applauded; the girl with her splendid beauty had become quite a favorite. Upon her first appearance, and although Helen despised the man who had thrown the flowers—despised him without knowing him on account of his insolent speech, which she knew well enough was intended to reach her ears—yet it was stage etiquette to pick up the bouquet, and the audience would have risen en masse to resent the affront if the actress had neglected to possess herself of the flowers and then smile her thanks to the audience; but the moment she got off the stage, in the "wings"—as the side-scenes which mask in the stage are called—with a contemptuous toss she flung down the costly flowers, much to the astonishment of the rest of the company, although they regarded the girl as an odd fish, anyway, for she was very quiet and seldom mingled with the rest.

The manager of this particular opera house was a manageress—a woman; something rare in theatrical life, for there are not many lady managers. And this woman was a character, too; she was pretty well along in years, was tall and strong, with a deep, hoarse voice like a man, and, in fact, a very masculine way about her. Her life would have made a volume of most entertaining reading. As a child she had been brought up as a circus rider; as a young woman had been one of the great stars of the arena; she had married the proprietor of a circus and with him had traveled over almost the four quarters of the globe; had been shipwrecked half a dozen times; had seen her husband shot down before her eyes in a Texan country town when the canvas had been attacked by a gang of roughs, and report said

that, with a double-barreled shot-gun, she had slain the man who had killed her husband and helped to beat off the gang. And now, after this wild and wandering life, she had settled down as the proprietor of this Cincinnati opera house. She was extremely blunt and outspoken in her manner, the result of the wild life which she had led; but, for all that, was a kindly-hearted, honest woman, with a heart—as her circus boys used to express it—as big as a bullock's.

She was behind the scenes, and standing in the wing, when Helen came off, and her eyes opened widely as she beheld the young actress toss the costly flowers so contemptuously away.

"Well, well, young lady, you don't care much for 'buckets,' do you? and them kind cost five dollars a lick, too! I s'pose you don't know me; I'm Madam Pond, and I own this shanty, but you've got a chance now to own one twice as big, if you want to, for one of the richest men in this town is struck after you. He wants an introduction—Major Clutterbuck; that's him in the box, yonder."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MAJOR.

"I do not care to make any acquaintance, madam," Helen answered, politely, for she was impressed favorably by the face of the woman despite her harsh tone and rough way of talking.

"Now, little gal, don't you be foolish! You don't know what you are talking about. The major is one of the big-bugs of this town; why, he's worth a million, if he's worth a cent; been a big contractor, you know, and a big politician, too; got more irons in the fire all the time than ten ordinary men could attend to; and he's struck after you—struck awful bad. I don't think that I ever saw a man so clean-gone. I only wish that he would come after me! I tell you what—I'd throw myself right at him the moment he said the word. I ain't been much on the marry since poor Pond died, but I think the major's money would fetch me."

The two were standing a little apart from the rest in the scene entrance so that the conversation was not overheard by any one.

"He wants to give you a nice little wine supper to-night after the show is out," the manageress continued; "give him a chance, you know, to make your acquaintance."

"I never accept such invitations," Helen replied, coldly.

"Oh, it's all right! You needn't be alarmed. The major has invited me, too, to play propriety, you know, and you can bring Pearl with you, too, if you want to. I knew that you two were mighty thick, and I told the major that I reckoned you wouldn't come without her. I tell you! we'll have an elegant spread!" and the woman smacked her lips in anticipation. "When the major goes at anything he makes the cash fly!"

"Madam, I cannot say that I feel honored by the invitation for I do not!" the young actress exclaimed, spiritedly. "I do not know the gentleman, and I am not anxious to make his acquaintance, and, least of all, do I like the way in which he seeks to become acquainted with me."

"My dear little gal, don't be an idiot!" the woman protested; "how on earth is the man to get acquainted with you unless you give him a chance? and, to my thinking, it is a mighty nice delicate way of fixing the thing. I tell you, the man is clean gone on you! you can become Mrs. Major Clutterbuck as easily as turning your hand over, if you like."

"But, I do not like!" Helen replied, her eyes flashing, and the color mounting into her cheeks.

"And it doesn't make a bit of difference to me about the man's money. I do not wish to make his acquaintance. I will not go to his supper; you may tell him so from me; and, furthermore, you may tell him that he will oblige me greatly if he will discontinue his flowers. I do not appreciate his bouquets; the moment I get off the stage I fling them away as fast as possible, and if it were not for offending the audience, from whom comes the money by means of which I live, I would not pick up his flowers at all."

"Why, what on earth has the man done to you that you have taken such a dislike to him?" cried Madam Pond, in wonder.

"He made an insulting remark when I came on the stage, Monday night," the girl answered, her cheeks hot with anger, "and made it so loudly that I overheard it, as he intended I should."

"Good gracious! and is that what this fuss is about?" and the madam showed her surprise. "Well, if you ain't the most thin-skinned young

lady I ever run across! I was at the back of the box; I heard what he said, and all the rest of the men were newspaper fellows, critics, and the major said it on purpose to start them a-going. I never heard of a woman being affronted before by being told that she was handsome. And didn't the newspapers ring the changes on it, to-day, too? Did you see the notices? Why, there isn't one of them that doesn't say you are the handsomest woman that ever came to Cincinnati, and the major put it up for you, too. He stood the champagne for the bull gang in the saloon in front of the theater, after the show was out, and I heard him say, with my own ears—'Gentlemen, I tell you what it is, she is the handsomest woman that ever struck this here town; and don't you forget it! Here's her health, boys, and if any one of you snoozers neglects to jest put in the big licks for that gal, in to-morrow's papers, he'll have me in his wool, that's all!'

A look of disgust appeared on the handsome face of the actress. And this was the glorious life of which she had dreamed ever since she was a girl! This was the laurel crown which she was to clutch and wear! Oh, it was too terrible!

"A hundred dollar bill couldn't have done you as much good in this town as the major, last night," the manageress continued, "and it would only be the fair thing to go and drink his wine, and eat his supper, considering how he fixed it with the gang for you."

By this gentle term did the lady refer to the newspaper critics of the goodly city of Cincinnati.

"I shall not go, madam, nor will I make the man's acquaintance; and it makes me feel really ashamed, now that I know how my newspaper notices were obtained. I thought they were fair and honest notices, and had no idea they were really bought and paid for."

"Mighty few newspaper notices in this country that ain't bought and paid for, in some way," the madam retorted. "Well, it is to be no, then?"

"No, it most certainly is!"

"The major will be tearing."

The look upon the face of the actress signified more eloquently than words that the major might "tear" all he liked, as far as she cared.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BOLD STROKE.

MADAM POND, somewhat annoyed that she had been so completely unsuccessful in her mission, returned to the box, wherein sat the major, in a decidedly bad humor.

And that gentleman, who prided himself, and with good reason, too, upon his astuteness, guessed that she had not been successful.

That the girl would decline the proffered invitation never once entered the woman's head. On the contrary she had thought that the beautiful blonde would be delighted at the opportunity and she was both annoyed and mystified by her refusal.

"Well, she wouldn't have it, eh?" the major queried, as the madam reentered the box.

"Indeed you are right; she would not," replied the woman, her manner betraying that she considered herself an injured party.

"What's the matter? What is the trouble with my beauty?" and the major laughed as if he considered the refusal a good joke.

The major, by the way, was a tall, portly man with a little round head, almost completely bald, only a fringe of red hair remaining. Red also was the elaborately curled and waxed mustache, and the pointed imperial which adorned his fat face.

Everything but an Adonis, he yet flattered himself that he was a regular lady-killer, but ugly men do take such notions into their heads, sometimes!

"Well, she doesn't care to make your acquaintance," curtly.

The manageress was nettled and angry with herself that she had conveyed the invitation seeing that the major had looked upon it as a joke. The girl was an impudent, upstart hussy to refuse such a polite invitation; the major was a fool for having tendered it; but she herself was a still bigger fool for mixing herself up in the matter at all.

"She doesn't care to make my acquaintance, eh?" and again the astute politician laughed as if it was a pleasant jest. "Oh, well, she will get over that in time when she finds out what a nice fellow I am," and the major leaned back in his chair and winked knowingly at the manageress, but she didn't enjoy the pleasantry.

"If she has got anything to say about it, she

won't make your acquaintance!" the madam spoke decidedly. "She heard that remark you made when she came on the stage the first night, about her being a handsome girl, and instead of taking it as a compliment, as any sensible woman would, it made her angry."

"Heard it!" and the major chuckled; "of course she heard it; I intended that she should. It was merely a neat way, you know, of letting her see that she had made an impression upon me."

"It was a neat way of making her take a big dislike to you!" the woman retorted. "I tell you that you are just wasting your time and money. She don't want to have anything to do with you."

"Oh, I have seen women before this one," the other replied, complacently. "I know how to take 'em, I know all their little tricks. This girl only wants coaxing; that's all."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" and there was a very perceptible sneer both on the woman's face and in her voice. "Well, you just go ahead, and if you succeed in getting on good terms with this haughty minx—"

"What then?" and the major laughed in the other's face.

"Why, you are a smarter man than I think you are, that's all," and with this parting shot the madam retreated.

Again the gentleman laughed and rubbed his fat, kid-gloved hands softly together as he remarked:

"That woman thinks that she knows everything. She judges every other woman in this world by herself. She knows very well that if a man threw diamonds and such trash at her she would jump at them like a cat at a mouse. She hasn't any idea that, by holding back and playing shy, a girl increases her value. It was a sudden fancy I took to this beauty, but I believe I was in the right about it; she is a deuced fine critter, and is worth the winning. 'What is the good of a girl who is ready to throw herself into your arms the moment you look at her? That ain't the kind of gal I like. I ain't no Turkish sultan to go 'round flinging handkerchiefs at women!'" the major continued, with more energy than grammar. "I like a critter who puts a value on herself like this hyer one does. She's the queen for my money, I reckon!"

At this point the girl came on the stage again, and although from the position in which he sat, the box being on the level of the stage, he could almost have reached out his hand and touched her, yet with the utmost coolness, he raised his heavy opera-glasses—more like a pair of field-glasses than their smaller kindred, and applying them to his eyes kept them persistently fixed upon the face of the actress all the time she was upon the stage, much to her annoyance, for, though she absolutely ignored the presence of the inquisitor, yet she was conscious of the scrutiny, and it made the angry blood rise in her veins.

The excitement caused an unwonted color to appear upon her cheeks, and never in all her life had she looked so superbly beautiful.

"By George! she is a 'darling!'" exclaimed the politician, dropping, as was his habit, into the slang of the day. "Yes, sir, she is a darling and a daisy, and I am going to have her if it costs a small fortune. How she would make 'em open their eyes at Washington, rigged out in silk and satin and with about twenty thousand dollars' worth of diamonds on! Wouldn't they stare when the word went 'round, 'That's old Clutterbuck's property, Clutterbuck of Ohio!' and I reckon that when I sent out invitations for a 'spread' there wouldn't be many men in Washington who would hesitate to accept if they knew that this gorgeous queen was a-going to preside over the ceremonies. Oh, decidedly she is just the kind of woman I have been looking after for a deuced long time!"

The actress passed from the stage, and the major, lowering his opera-glass, tilted back his chair against the wall and fell into a brown study. Not a whit did he care for the performance excepting when the woman who had fascinated him was upon the stage. We say fascinated, and yet the word is not exactly the right one to use, for the wily speculator and politician was not the kind of a man to be fascinated by anybody. He was of too cold and selfish a nature to ever yield to "love's delicious thrill." He wanted the girl for a certain purpose—a purpose for which she was exactly suited; he had been looking for a tool for quite a long time, but, as he would have expressed it, he had never found any one to "fill the bill" until this actress made her appearance, and then, when she had finished her first speech he had slapped his fat hand upon his fat knee in

delight. His companions thought that he was admiring the lady, and so he was, and at the same time exclaiming to himself: "She'll do; she's the very woman—young, beautiful, a regular lady with an air like a queen; wouldn't she look stunning in diamonds!"

From that moment the major had followed as persistently in the woman-chase as a blood-hound upon the trail of the flying fugitive.

Now in deep thought he cogitated; he was planning how to lay the wires to accomplish the object in view. Suddenly a sly, cunning smile crept over his face. He had hit upon a plan!

Just then Helen Bell came upon the stage again, and once more the schemer gave himself up to the enjoyment of gloating over her "points," just as if she had been a horse or a dog which he thought of buying.

The studied indifference which the girl displayed in regard to his presence did not annoy the major in the least; on the contrary, he was highly pleased.

"Hang me if she won't do the honors like an empress!" he exclaimed. "Can't she give the cold shoulder to the fellows who don't step up to the mark as they oughter? Oh, she's the stock for my money!"

The rest of the week passed off uneventfully enough until Saturday night came. It had been threatening a storm all day long, and finally, just about dusk, the rain commenced in a kind of drizzle, that kept on falling steadily.

"We shall get wet through," Sara exclaimed in dismay to Helen, always her constant companion, as they emerged from the shelter of the hotel.

"Yes; had we not better take a carriage?" the other asked. "It is a long way to the theater, and we are sure to get our feet wet."

"These hackmen always charge so much," Sara grumbled. She was always of a frugal mind.

A hackman, standing by, espying the two ladies, swooped down upon them.

"Coach, ladies?"

"Well, I don't know," replied Miss Pearl, doubtfully. "How much will you charge to take us to the opera house across the Rhine?"

An extremely unsavory canal which runs through the center of the city of Cincinnati is dignified by this classic title, from the fact that for a great many years, about all the people who lived in the upper part of the city, across the canal, were Germans, and to cross the canal, the Rhine, was at once to enter upon this German land.

"Oh, blessed if I knew you, ladies, wrapped up in yer waterproofs," the hackman exclaimed, with the easy familiarity of his class. "I was in Monday night and seed the show. Well, seeing as how it is you, and we allers makes a discount to the perfession, I will take you to the opera house, and fetch you home after the show, for three dollars."

"We may not need the coach coming home; the rain may stop," Sara remarked.

"Oh, bless you! this rain is good for to-morrow," the driver assured. "When it sets in at this hyer time of the year it never rains less nor two or three days; but, if the rain holds up, I won't charge you but two dollars."

"That is too much; make it two dollars for the whole thing and then we will ride home, anyway."

"Well, durned if I don't, seeing that it is you! So jump in!" And when the two got in the carriage, Sara could not forbear remarking:

"You see, dear, it never does to give these men what they ask. You can always beat them down about one-half."

At the theater the two girls alighted.

"You will be sure to be here at the close of the performance?" Sara asked.

"Oh, yes; you can depend upon me, and if I ain't hyer you won't have to pay nobody nothing, you know," and the hackman winked as he drove off.

The entertainment passed off as usual. The curtain descended and the last performance of the Black Crook, as far as this company were concerned, in Cincinnati, was over. And heartily glad, too, were all the members of the troupe, for being all rather "high-toned" in their ideas they didn't relish playing to this lager-beer-drinking, cigar-smoking audience, no matter how appreciative they might be, and regardless of the fact that their money was just as good as anybody else's.

As Sara had a very difficult dress to take off and was naturally very slow about it, being always tired after her hard work, it followed that she was generally about the last one to leave the theater. Helen, of course, waited for her.

When the two girls came out they found the hack in waiting, and very glad indeed were they that they had engaged it, for the rain had increased rather than diminished.

The driver jumped down and opened the door, and as he did so a man who had been standing in the shadow of the theater doorway advanced and addressed Miss Pearl.

"Miss Sara Pearl, I believe?" he said.

"Yes, sir," responded the actress, surveying the person, to perceive that he was not known to her.

"Will you have the kindness to favor me with a few minutes' conversation in private upon a matter which is of great importance to you? I will detain you but a few moments," he hastened to add, perceiving that the girl was not disposed to grant the request. "We can step into the theater; it won't take but a moment."

There was something very earnest and persuasive about the man, and Sara wondered, although she did not believe that what he had to say was of any particular importance.

"It is raining and my friend will get wet," she said.

"Get right into the coach, ma'am," suggested the hackman, who was holding the door open.

"It is really a matter of almost life and death importance, miss!" the man pleaded.

"Very well; get in the carriage, Helen; I won't be long," and Sara followed the man into the theater again while her companion entered the coach.

"I'll just shut the door, miss, while I look arter the horses, and it will keep the rain out," the driver said, after the girl had entered the carriage; then he closed the door and disappeared from Helen's sight.

In the back lobby the stranger told Sara quite a long story, much to her disgust, but it was almost impossible to get away from the man. He was a writer, one of the struggling, unsuccessful fellows who never seem able to make their mark in this world. He had a play—a grand play, and Miss Pearl was exactly suited for the heroine. If she would only condescend to take and play his piece both of their fortunes would be made at once.

It was the same old story the girl had listened to twenty times at least. Finally to get rid of the fellow, as he said that he was utterly without money, and knew not where to sleep that night, she gave him a dollar. He clutched it with much emotion, protested that he would repay it at the first convenient opportunity, and vanished into the street.

Sara put up her purse and shook her head dubiously.

"I will never see that dollar again," she muttered, then she passed through the door into the rain.

The street was deserted!

Sara stared; she looked up and down, but, look where she would no coach met her eyes.

"Where on earth have they gone? What does the fellow mean by driving off in this way?" Then she hurried down to the street, thinking perhaps that the coach was around the corner, but not a sign of one could she discover!

She knew not what to make of it, and in utter bewilderment made her way to the hotel, thinking that it was just possible the man had driven Helen home; but no Helen could she find! In despair she hunted up Gordon Mallory and told him the story.

The young actor knitted his brows; strange it seemed to him that so many perils encircled the young actress.

"Go to bed," he said, at last, "I will not rest until I find her!"

And Sara had faith that he would be as good as his word.

CHAPTER XXV.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

AFTER entering the coach, Miss Bell sunk back on the seat and gave herself up to reflections which were of a decidedly gloomy cast. So far her stage experience had not been a pleasant one. In her day-dreams of the actress's glorious life, she had not counted upon certain drawbacks which actual experience had now taught her most certainly existed. The rose of dramatic glory was not without its thorns, and, brief as had been her career upon the stage, some of the thorns had wounded her severely. Unlike the heroines of the many stories she had read, wherein the lucky girl, by going upon the stage, either operatic or dramatic, at a single bound gains both fame and fortune, she had not won her laurel crown or the glittering dress which the empty-headed world tosses at the feet of its idols. She was "very good,"

experienced old stagers said, worth twenty-five or thirty dollars a week, not a large salary when the cost of an actress's board and wardrobe is considered; but, where, oh, where were the countless thousands which she had been so sure of gaining?

It was a hard life; a great many discomforts were attached to it, and every dollar she earned she felt that she had worked for; it was not play, but toil—the general idea to the contrary notwithstanding.

Although buried in these gloomy thoughts, the girl could not help noticing that the driver was having a great deal of trouble with his horses, which seemed to be very restive; they were prancing up and down, and the driver was endeavoring to restrain them, but, apparently, unsuccessfully.

Finally, the animals gave a plunge and started. Away they went at a full gallop, the driver shouting at them, but the beasts were evidently very fractious; down the street they tore, and whirled around the corner into the next avenue, evidently at the top of their speed.

The girl began to get alarmed; the beasts were evidently entirely beyond control, and there seemed to be danger of an upset. The thought passed through her mind that she had better attempt to get out, although from the speed at which the vehicle was going, there was great danger in the effort.

She attempted to open the door, but the door-knob was evidently out of order and it would not work; the other door was equally obstinate, and so, perforce, she was obliged to remain in the carriage, although she expected that every moment it would be upset and dashed in pieces.

For a good twenty minutes the coach kept on in its wild career; then the horses began to tire of their wild pranks, and the driver succeeded in getting them under control. They subsided into a trot, and finally the driver pulled them to a halt. Turning in his seat he addressed the young lady through the glass window in the front.

"Did you ever see sich contrary beasts?" he exclaimed, hoarsely.

It was so dark that the girl could hardly see his face, but from his voice it was evident that he was greatly excited.

"Where are we?" was Helen's natural question.

"Way on the edge of the town; it will take a good half-hour to git back ag'in, blast their pictur's!" growled the driver. "But, don't be alarmed, miss; thar ain't any danger of their trying that trick ag'in. They have got all the running they want for one while. Jest keep quiet and I will have you back in no time if the beasts ain't hurt themselves with their foolishness."

"Oh, I am not afraid."

The driver drove on again, and Helen, sinking back upon the seat, reflected upon what Sara would think.

"She will be terribly alarmed when she finds that the coach is gone, and will no doubt imagine all kinds of dreadful things. Thank Heaven that it isn't any worse. I have been pretty well frightened, but I might have been seriously hurt if the coach had been overturned," she murmured.

The coach rattled on, and Helen took little heed of the surroundings, nor even of how the time was passing, until at last, beginning to grow sleepy, the thought came into her head that it was surely time they were at the hotel, and she was just about to speak to the driver when the coach suddenly stopped; the driver dismounted and came to the door, which, even with his strong hands, he had a great deal of difficulty in opening.

"Miss, one of these 'ere horses has gone dead lame, and I'm afeard that he has got a hurt in his foot. Would you mind gettin' out and waiting here in this doorway while I drive up to the saloon yonder and see about it? I wouldn't like to have you go up thar in the coach, miss, for thar's always a hard crowd of boys a-hanging round thar at this time of night, and it might not be pleasant for you. It won't take me long, and I'll come right back as soon as I find out what is the matter."

Helen thought the driver was very kind and considerate, and she thanked him for it; from such a rough fellow she would not have expected such thoughtfulness.

The driver mounted to the box and away he drove.

The girl looked around her, and, as the rain was falling quite heavily, she sought shelter in the ample door of the mansion before which the coach had halted.

The night was so dark that the girl could not

even distinguish the houses on the opposite side of the street, or, in fact, any other house at all in the neighborhood.

"How lonely it seems in the darkness," she muttered; "one would think there wasn't another house within sight."

Then there was the sound of a key turning in the lock and of bolts being drawn; some one was about to open the door behind her!

It was rather an unpleasant position, but the actress must either encounter the new-comer, whoever it was, or else go out into the storm, and surely, she thought, in such a driving rain, no one would deny her the poor privilege of shelter within the porch.

The door opened and a woman bearing a light appeared—a stout, rather hard-featured woman, a coal-oil lamp in her hand. She surveyed the girl with a look of curiosity.

"Did you want to see any one, miss?" she asked, respectfully.

"No, ma'am; one of the horses of the coach in which I was riding suddenly became lame, and the driver requested me to remain here while he went to the saloon yonder, which he said was not a fit place for a lady to visit."

"Well, I should say not; but, won't you come in, miss? I will leave the door open and the lamp on the table in the entry, so that the driver will know you are in the house and can call you when he returns."

"I would not think of troubling you, madam."

"Oh, no trouble at all, but you will catch your death of cold standing out here," and in truth the girl was shivering, for the night air was growing chill and keen. "Come in, and you are heartily welcome. I have a good warm room up-stairs. I was sitting there reading when the coach drove up. I heard it stop at the door and drive away, and then I thought that I heard somebody knock; that is the reason why I came down, but I suppose it was you moving about on the porch. You needn't be alarmed, miss; there ain't a soul in the house except myself; the family are all away, and I am left to take care of the property."

The girl was cold—in fact, rapidly becoming chilled to the bone, and the thought occurred to her that it was possible the driver might not be inclined to be in a hurry to leave the comforts of a warm saloon; this induced her to accept the woman's invitation.

"All right; follow me right up-stairs. Standing in the porch on such a night as this is enough to give you your death of cold."

The woman placed the lamp upon a table in the hall, then led the way up the stairs.

The house was elegantly furnished and evidently the dwelling of a man of means.

At the head of the stairs a long passage extended through the house, and at the further end of the passage the guide ushered the actress into a large room most magnificently furnished, and heated evidently by hot air from a furnace.

"Sit down, miss, and I will go and see if I can't get you some refreshment."

The actress begged the woman not to put herself to the trouble, but she would do it, and after placing a comfortable easy-chair for her guest by the register in the wall, departed.

The fatigue which she felt, the warm air of the room and the seductive influence of the extremely comfortable chair all combined to produce drowsiness and almost before she was aware she was fast locked in slumber's bonds!

And she slept on, undisturbed, until the gray light of the morning stole in at the heavily-curtained windows; then, with a sudden start, she awoke and looked around in vast amazement. For a moment she was puzzled and then all at once the events of the past night flashed upon her.

But what did it all mean? Why had not the driver come for her? Why had she been allowed to sleep all night in the chair?

She sprang to her feet and went to the door. It was fastened; then she hurried to the windows, pulled aside the curtains and lo!—each window was guarded by iron bars!

The truth flashed upon her; she had been entrapped!

CHAPTER XXVI.

MORE MYSTERY.

YES, Helen had been entrapped most surely! She began to ponder over the strange affair; was it all a cunningly-contrived plot from the beginning? It seemed like it, and yet, why should it be so? What reason was there for the committal of such an act of high-handed violence? But the more she pondered the more bewildered she became.

She was standing in the center of the apartment, having started back from the window in utter amazement and horror upon discovering that the casement was protected by strong iron bars. Another door opposite to the one by which she had entered attracted her attention. Possibly this second door might not be fastened, and it was not, as she discovered upon trying it, but to her disappointment the door only led into another apartment, a most luxuriously-furnished sleeping-room, and the girl, although one of those peculiar natures slow to manifest feeling, could not repress an exclamation of surprise as she looked upon the superb apartment. All that taste could devise and wealth afford was there; the bride of an Eastern king could not have asked for a more sumptuously-furnished chamber. Even a dressing-table with all the little notions so necessary to the toilet of a beautiful woman was provided, and the various articles were spread out upon the top in full view, just as if the inmate of the room had been occupied with them but a moment before. In fact, so complete was the illusion that the apartment had been occupied only a little while ago, that Helen looked anxiously around as though she expected to see the occupant hiding away in some corner.

The expectation, though, was not realized; not a soul was within the room; the bed was smoothly made up and showed no signs of having been occupied during the previous night.

But, extravagant as was the luxury of the apartment, the window-curtains, being partly drawn aside, revealed that these casements, like those in the other room, were securely guarded by stout iron bars.

In all her experience Helen Bell had never seen or read of anything like this; a mansion furnished as this one was, and yet with all the windows guarded by iron bars like a prison, was really something most strange.

But, as she pondered over this mysterious affair, a sudden thought flashed into her mind. Was it possible that, either by accident or design, she had been brought to a lunatic asylum? The girl had never been inside any such institution, and her natural good sense told her that apartments in an asylum would not, as a rule, be fitted up in this sumptuous manner, and the more she puzzled her brain to explain the mystery the more bewildered she became.

Suddenly a peculiar grating noise reached her ears coming from the other apartment; quickly she turned and returned to the other room, thinking that some one was entering.

The sound, though, came not from the door, but from a small closet, the door of which was closed and which she had not noticed before.

The noise stopping as she approached the closet, she hastened to open the little door, and the moment she did this the cause was at once made apparent.

Within the closet was a dumb waiter, quite a small one, and its ascension from the floor below had caused the noise. Upon one of the shelves of the waiter was a small hand-bell and a sheet of paper upon which, in a very coarse hand, though evidently penned by a woman, some lines were written.

Eagerly the girl snatched up the brief note, trusting that she might discover some explanation of this strange affair, but in this she was disappointed, for upon the paper appeared the following communication:

"When you get hungry and want your breakfast ring the bell; in the adjoining apartment you will find all the necessary articles for your toilet."

"I am not only to be well housed but well fed also, it would seem," the girl remarked.

"It is quite evident, even if I am a prisoner, it is not intended I shall starve to death. In time, some one will come and then this mystery will be explained, and until my jailer makes his appearance, the best thing I can do is to make myself as comfortable as possible."

During her brief career upon the stage the actress had grown to be quite a woman of the world, and she took this odd adventure as coolly as though it was a mere everyday occurrence.

She rung the bell upon the dumb-waiter, and hardly had she replaced it upon the shelf when down sunk the whole concern.

And then a voice rung through the room, coming evidently from a speaking-tube somewhere in the wall:

"In twenty minutes the meal will be ready; everything will be cooked fresh for you, so do not be impatient."

So said the voice, and the girl recognized the tones of the instant. It was the voice of the woman who had pressed the hospitality of the mansion upon her—the spider who had tempted

her, the innocent, unwary fly, to walk into the web which had so completely ensnared her.

"This is no accident, but all a deep-laid design!" the girl exclaimed, and then to her mind came thoughts of the mysterious woman who had caused her to be abducted in New Haven.

Of course when she had rejoined Miss Pearl, and they had exchanged confidences, all the events of that night of mystery became clear to her. Both she and her companion had been chloroformed; then she had been carried off bodily; but, what reason there was for the strange proceeding, what end was to be gained, and who the unknown lady was, who knew so much of her family affairs—more than she knew herself, or had ever suspected—she could not guess.

Now that she was again a prisoner, so cunningly entrapped, and so closely, though luxuriously confined, thoughts of the unknown lady at once flashed upon her.

Who else but the person who had once abducted her would be likely to play the same trick?

Time would reveal the mystery, of course; and so, with a calmness which was quite wonderful she proceeded to make her toilet, an operation which did not consume much time, for such a beautiful girl as the actress truly was did not require artificial aids to enhance her beauty.

In twenty minutes promptly the dumb-waiter ascended, bearing a breakfast upon its shelves which would have added a luster to the crown of the best Parisian cook.

A round dozen of rare and dainty dishes, all exquisitely garnished, and tempting-looking enough even to attract the attention of one who had just risen from a hearty meal. The table equipage was all of solid silver, and a long-necked bottle of breakfast wine flanked the steaming coffee-pot. Of course the girl was no judge of any such thing, but if she had been, and had examined the label, she would have known that the wine was one of the rarest vintages known to the epicure, and worth a good twenty dollars a bottle!

Helen, with her characteristic rare good sense, determined to enjoy the feast and wait patiently for the explanation which she felt sure soon must come.

But neither coffee nor wine did she touch. She had become suspicious, and feared that one or both might contain a narcotic. A small pitcher of ice-water was also upon the table, and of this she drank.

The repast finished she replaced the dishes upon the waiter, and the woman below, evidently upon the watch, called out through the speaking-tube—the location of which however the girl could not discover, despite her careful search:

"Please place all the things upon the waiter and ring the bell when you are through."

With this request the girl complied, and when the tinkle of the bell ceased, again the voice spoke:

"Keep the bell and when you wish anything please to ring."

The girl took the bell and down the waiter descended. The moment it disappeared from sight Helen rung the bell violently.

"What is it, please?" called out the voice. "Speak down through the waiter-well and I can hear you."

"I wish to know what is the meaning of this mystery—why am I detained here?" the young actress asked.

"I do not know," the woman replied. "I am hired to wait upon you and instructed to see that you do not want for anything."

"And who is your employer?"

"Miss, I cannot answer, I am forbidden."

"But you are running a great risk—you are rendering yourself liable to the law by taking a part in this outrage!" the girl cried, indignantly. "You are depriving me of my liberty and the law will punish you severely for taking part in such a crime."

"I don't know anything about it, miss," the voice answered, the tone calm and respectful. "I did not bring you here. You came of your own free will, as far as I know, and I am not opposing any obstacles to your departure. I have nothing at all to do with it."

"This is evasion!" replied Helen. "All you have to do to set me at liberty is to come up and unlock this door. I am very far from being rich, but out of my limited means I will pay you any sum I can for the service."

"It is impossible," said the voice, still calm, still very respectful. "In the first place, I have not the key, and therefore I cannot unlock the door, even if I would. In the second, I

am forbidden by the person who pays me my wages to ascend to your floor. When I accepted the position I promised to obey his orders, and I cannot break my word."

"His orders!" Helen repeated, mechanically, to herself. Her guess then was wrong. It was not the mysterious woman, the contriver of the first abduction, who was the promoter of this second one. And yet the man referred to might be the agent in charge of the affair, employed by the woman, for of course she could not very well carry through such an affair in her own proper person.

"When can I see this person who has dared to commit this outrage—dared to deprive me of my liberty?" cried the actress.

"As soon as you like; I expect him here every moment."

"Tell him then that I wish to see him the moment he arrives."

"Yes, miss; I will," then there was quite a pause, broken at last by the woman's exclaiming: "He has just come in, miss, and I will tell him to wait upon you at once."

Soon, then, the mystery of this odd affair would be solved.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE EXPLANATION.

THE young actress now became intensely excited. The color began to rise in her usually pale cheeks and her eyes to sparkle with an unwonted brilliancy.

She sat down in the easy-chair by the center-table and fixed her eyes upon the door, thinking each moment to hear the tread of footsteps and the sound of the key turning in the lock.

Five—ten minutes she waited, every vein within her body thrilling with excitement, but not the slightest sound from without reached her ears; another minute and then a slight noise right at her side attracted her attention, a noise almost imperceptible, but, slight as it was, it caused her to turn to see what had occasioned it.

A man dressed in a full evening suit, got up regardless of expense, with great diamond studs sparkling in his snowy shirt-bosom, and an elaborate diamond breast pin, shaped in the form of a cross, worth a king's ransom, was standing within a yard of her!

So complete was the surprise that Helen's breath came short and quick for a moment, and then, trembling all over with excitement, she sprang to her feet.

There was a secret door to the room in the side-wall by the dumb-waiter, evidently, and the man had stolen through while the girl's attention had been fixed upon the door. The thick pile of the carpet had muffled the sound of his footsteps and so he had been able to reach the side of the table, almost within arm's-length of the girl, without exciting her notice.

For a good three minutes he had stood there, gloating upon the beauty of the charming woman whom he had so dextrously entrapped within his power.

A long-drawn breath which he unconsciously allowed to escape him, as the demon of triumph swelled within his heart, put an end to the tableau.

The actress recognized the man at once and he knew it well enough, by the flaming look of utter scorn which appeared upon the beautiful face.

The man was Major Clutterbuck!

And as she looked at that gross, gloating face, she realized that what had occurred had been carefully planned by the creature before her.

The storm had afforded the opportunity which the politician had been quick to improve. The hackman had been hired to lie in wait for herself and Sara at the hotel and coax them to ride. The fellow who had so urgently begged for a private interview with Miss Pearl at the back-door of the theater was a tool, employed for the express purpose of separating her from her companion; the runaway horses, the driver's story about the lameness of one of the animals, his getting her to seek the shelter of the porch while he went to the saloon for assistance, the woman's invitation to enter the house—all were but parts of a plot framed with fiendish cunning. Her falling asleep, though, in the luxurious apartment, was an accident, but it helped the crafty scoundrel to complete his design and threw her completely into the snare.

And now, as she comprehended all the details of this cunningly-devised scheme, and understood how successfully it had been carried out, how completely she was in the power of this man, at whom her very soul revolted, she tow-

ered aloft, drawing her figure up to its fullest height, absolutely looking down upon the rather squatly-figured politician, and glared at him so with her magnificent eyes that, despite the strength of his impudence, and the great amount of his unblushing assurance, the man really felt a little uncomfortable.

However, as he had often boasted, he was not the man to turn back when he had once put his hand to the wheel, and although for the first time he realized the full extent of the task which he had so wantonly taken upon himself, and foresaw that he had the most difficult job of his life before him, yet, bull-dog like, he was determined to go ahead.

Smooth words and bland civility he intended to oppose to angry looks and threatening words.

And so he bowed as lowly before the girl upon whom he had put such an insult as though she was a queen—more than a queen, the empress of some Eastern land, and he one of the humblest of her slaves.

"I humbly beg your pardon, miss, for the liberty I have taken, and I trust you will not refuse to listen to my excuse, although I am aware that there can hardly be any excuse for such an outrageous act as this one that I have been guilty of, but when a man is blind with passion—drunk with love, then 'the wits fly and madness rules the hour.'"

The major was quite an able stump-speaker, and had often prided himself upon his extempore orations.

But not the slightest effect did his words produce upon the girl; in lofty scorn she looked at him as though her eyes were daggers to pierce him to the heart.

He was quick to comprehend that he had not made the slightest impression, so he tried again.

"I repeat I know there isn't any excuse for what I have done, and that words only increase the enormity of the act, but when a man loses his reason he ought not, by good rights, to be blamed for what he does. I tried my best to procure an introduction to you—an honorable introduction, such as any lady might grant to any respectable gentleman without fear of compromising herself. Of course, I know that ladies who are in public life like yourself, cannot be too careful, and I have been informed that I incurred your displeasure by the exclamation which escaped from me in the box the first night you appeared in the opera-house, here, but I could not have helped uttering it, Miss Bell, any more than I could have helped breathing; it was an honest, genuine opinion, and you must really blame yourself and nature for that. I could no more help exclaiming that you were beautiful, than you can help being the woman you are. Baffled in all my efforts, then, to gain an honorable introduction to you, desperate at the thought that you were going away, and that I should no more behold you, an evil genius, I believe, suggested to me the plan by means of which you were brought here. The historic incident which comes back to me from my boyhood's days suggested it—the rape of the Sabine women by the Roman youths; I mean the Sabine."

The major was a little rusty in his history.

Helen never moved a muscle; she might have been a statue as far as showing signs of life was concerned, excepting, of course, the quick heaving of her bosom, and the expressive flashes of her great, glorious eyes. She was waiting for the man to finish, and then she had a few words to say.

"Fair means would not avail, and so I was obliged to try foul; and dare I hope that this frank confession will, in part, excuse the offense?"

"Please to open the door, sir, and allow me to depart," the girl replied, coldly.

The major perceived that that "tack" wouldn't work, so he was ready for another.

"Miss Bell, in all things you will find me your most obedient slave!" with another low bow. "In all things but that your slightest wish would be as law to me, but I trust you will pardon me even this one disobedient act when I explain that if I decline to release you it is simply to allow me time to define my position. If you will have the kindness to be seated—"

"No, not in your house, sir." The words and the lady's manner ought to have convinced the major that he was only wasting time, but he wouldn't be convinced.

"It will be so much more comfortable and agreeable to us both," he urged. "I have quite an explanation to make, and I am afraid that you will tire."

"Undoubtedly I shall," the girl answered,

icily. "Why, then, do you trouble both yourself and me? I do not wish to hear anything you may have to say; in this transaction you have made a mistake. You are too sensible, I trust, not to have discovered by this time that you have acted both foolishly and wickedly. You have committed a crime which cannot benefit you in the least. At present it is only known to ourselves and to the wretched creatures whom you used as tools. Allow me to return to my hotel, avoid me for the future, and I will believe that you are sincerely sorry for the error into which you have been led."

"Certainly, that is my intention," the major hastened to say, although he hadn't the slightest intention of doing anything of the kind; so he continued: "Will you not have the kindness to be seated?" and he waved his fat hand, jeweled heavily with diamond rings, toward the easy-chair. "You have no idea how much it distresses me to see you stand."

"Not more than it does me to know that I am here and compelled to listen to you," the girl coldly replied.

"Well, a willful woman must have her way, says the proverb," he returned. "I do not blame you for being particular; of course I know enough of your professional life to be aware that there are a great many trials and temptations connected with it, and that a woman upon the stage cannot be too careful, but I beg to assure you that my intentions are strictly honorable."

"One would judge otherwise from this high-handed attempt upon my liberty," the girl replied, bitterly.

The major bowed low as if smarting under the reproach.

"What could I do?" he exclaimed. "Put yourself in my place, I beseech you! You were a lady with whom it seemed impossible to become acquainted in the usual way. Madam Pond in the kindest manner possible volunteered to procure me an introduction, when she heard me express a wish to make your acquaintance, but you wouldn't have it! What on earth could I do, except to give up the attempt or else procure the introduction in some other way. To give up, I may say, candidly and without boasting, is not in my nature. I am what is called a self-made man; what I am I owe to myself; mighty little assistance have I had in my battle of life and now that I am where I am, I confess I look back with peculiar pride upon the up-hill fight which I have made, and won."

The major swelled out pompously with his boast, but a wearied look appeared upon the features of the girl. Beyond all power of expression she loathed this man.

"But now allow me to introduce myself," he continued. "Of course by sight you are well acquainted with me, but my name and fame, such as it is, no doubt are foreign to your ears. Major Leander Clutterbuck is a name that counts for something in this town of Cincinnati. I am wealthy—rich enough to purchase anything in this world which can be bought. This is my country mansion which I occupy in the summer time; as you will perceive it is furnished with the utmost care. When I fitted up this establishment I had in my mind's eye the probability that one of these days I might be fortunate enough to find a lady who would suit the ideal which since the struggling days of my boyhood I have had in my mind's eye, but until I saw you no woman has ever reached the high standard which I had set up in my mind; but you—you are my very ideal! I am satisfied that with you I should be supremely happy. This is my excuse for this bold action. You would not allow me to make your acquaintance; I could not woo you in the usual fashion, and only by some bold stroke could I hope to gain speech with you at all. Will you overlook the act and forget the rashness of the deed in consideration of the motive? As my wife, I may say without exaggeration or flattery that few women in the country will be better situated. It is my intention to run for Congress this next election. The wires are all laid now to secure the nomination for me, and in my district a nomination by my party is just about the same as an election; we always carry the district by four to six thousand majority, so that almost anybody is sure to be elected if nominated; even an unpopular man would be pretty certain to go in, and I flatter myself that I am very far from being unpopular, in fact, I reckon that any one would have to hunt round right smart all through this State to find a man as popular as I am. Of course, after I am elected I shall have to go to Washington. Now, as I have plenty of money, it is my ambition when I get there to be the biggest toad

in the puddle. I calculate to have as handsome a house as money can buy. None of your rented concerns for me! I will buy it out and out, and then I will furnish it up in a style that will make people open their eyes—yes, the best of them. From the President downward there won't be a man in the capital who will put on the style that I will; I'll have a French cook, lay in my wines across the water, and give a spread that will astonish even the foreign ambassadors, and I tell you what, those foreign fellows know how to live! All that I lack is a woman like yourself to do the honors of the mansion. Just consider for a moment—reflect and think of the difference between the position you now occupy—the vagabond life of a strolling player, and the wealth, ease and luxury that I offer. Now you exhibit yourself nightly to any one who can raise the money to pay the admittance fee; you are exposed to humiliations and insults, and you can't avoid them, for the stage-player is more or less public property, while as my wife you will occupy a position second to no woman in this land, clear from the stormy Atlantic to the golden shores of the Pacific; you will be the envy of all your acquaintances. I sha'n't restrict you in your spending-money; you shall have all you want; and all I want is to have you dressed better than any woman you will meet anywhere. I want people to turn around and look after you as you roll by 'em in your carriage and say, 'That's Mrs. Major Clutterbuck—Congressman Clutterbuck from Ohio; she's got the finest diamonds of any woman in the country.' That is my little game! that is what I am after; so now, what do you say? Come! I don't pretend that I'm over head and ears in love with you, because I am too old a man for such boy-fool nonsense, but I have taken a very strong liking for you, and I am willing to put up my money on you. Can a man say more?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

ONE thing puzzled the politician; the actress had listened to his explanation without betraying approval or dissent. The face of a marble statue could not have been less expressive, and therefore he waited for her answer with feverish impatience.

"You have said all that you have to say?" she observed, her rich voice round and full but utterly devoid of emotion.

"Yes, all; it would be folly even for an experienced orator to attempt to persuade such a woman as you are against her convictions. I am too wise to attempt such a thing," the major replied, with a very gallant bow. "I have stated my case as strongly as I could and am content to leave the rest to your excellent judgment."

"It is a weighty step, and one that requires deliberation," impassively and mechanically.

"Of course; certainly; take all the time you like. A month if you choose, but I pray you not to keep me in suspense any longer than you can help," the major rejoined, yet far from feeling really pleased. "This house and all it contains are yours. You have but to command to be obeyed, and your most willing servant will be my humble self. I am not fitted exactly to play the rôle of the anxious lover, but I assure you I shall be on thorns until you come to a decision, which I hope and trust will be a favorable one."

"Such an offer should not be either lightly declined or accepted," the girl returned. "For such a woman as I am to be favored with an offer to become the wife of such a man as you are, is, of course, an honor for which one cannot be too grateful."

The gentleman certainly was obtuse as far as women were concerned, but, bull-headed as he was, it struck him that there was a double meaning to the girl's words—a scornful ring in her voice.

He concealed his apprehension, though, and hastened to reply:

"Oh, don't look at it in that way; you have beauty, grace, intelligence, style, a hundred things that go to make the perfect woman, while I have only wealth and position to offer, and if you accept I shall consider that I have by far the best of the bargain."

"I shall not require a month to make up my mind."

"I am glad of it."

"A single week will do."

"Miss Bell, I am really delighted to hear you say so!"

"Come to me in seven days from now and you shall be answered."

"I shall count the very minutes!" For a

rough and tough man of the world the major was doing bravely—in fact, playing the lover to perfection.

"In seven days," Miss Bell repeated, and then she looked toward the door by which she had entered the apartment.

The major's eyes followed the glance, but he did not exactly understand what she meant.

"Be pleased to open the door, then, so that I can depart."

The words fairly took the breath from the wooer, for the ugly suspicion at once came over him that the actress was not quite the marble statue he had taken her to be, and that, as he had tricked her in his way, she had made up her mind to trick him in return.

"Oh, no; that isn't the understanding!" he cried, when he had in a measure recovered himself.

"What understanding?" and the young actress looked at the man with an inscrutable expression.

"Why, you are to remain here until you come to a decision."

"Yes, and when the decision is made?"

"Why, we will be married, of course, and go at once on our wedding tour. We will have a private wedding, because I don't like a fuss kicked up about such things. We can do our displaying afterward."

"Very true; but you assume that I will consent. Suppose, on the contrary, with the willfulness of women, I should refuse?"

Obtuse as was the politician, he could not help noticing the scorn now fully apparent in the girl's voice. He was annoyed—angry, in fact, now that he realized the girl had been playing with him. She had not refused his offer at once because she wished to escape from her present unpleasant position. A spirit of revenge came up in his heart, and he mentally said: "Whether you consent or refuse, I will keep you here for a while, my beauty, and see if I cannot tame this devil that is in you." His face, though, did not betray the rage which was gnawing at his heart.

"Ah, yes, of course; that is only natural, you know," he replied. "A man always believes that will occur which he wishes to come to pass, and that is the reason why I am willing to give you a month to make up your mind. You may refuse my suit to-day, reject it a week hence, two weeks and your mind may not change, three weeks and you still hold fast to your first opinion, but, on the fourth, you may alter—you may conclude to accept what you have steadily refused before."

"You will keep me here a month, then, whether I will or no?" and the color began to rise in the girl's face, and her eyes to flash as she put the question.

The abductor saw that a storm was at hand, but he dared not now yield.

"Miss Bell, I know you will probably be angry, but I am a truthful man, and since you have asked me a plain question, it is but right that I should give you a plain answer," and the major swelled out quite pompously as he spoke. "I feel sure that in a month, if you are not guided or swayed by bad advisers, you will be willing to accept the proposal which I have had the honor to make. You will be as comfortable here as you could possibly be in any spot in the wide world: your very lightest wish will be as potent as the strongest command; you will be secure from all interruption; I myself will not intrude upon you, unless you request my presence; you will be free to make up your mind without being biased by any one, and I am confident that in a month you will consent to be mine."

"Not in one month—not in ten thousand months!" cried the girl, her anger at last flaming forth. "Man, have you no fear of the law that you dare to outrage it in this manner? Think of the punishment that will overtake you when the truth becomes known, as it soon will be, for I have friends who will not flag in their search for me!"

"My dear girl, there isn't the slightest danger of anybody discovering you here. I have laid my plans altogether too cautiously for any one to get upon my track, and it has cost a pretty penny, too, I assure you; not that I grudge the money if it succeeds in winning you, which I am sure it will."

"You are wrong; it will not!" Helen retorted. "I am not a dog to be bought and sold by any man! No matter how rich you are, or what you are, you cannot buy me, and soon my friends will come to the rescue."

"My dear child, I repeat—there isn't the slightest danger of that!"

But, even at that very moment, the opening of the secret door gave the lie to his words.

The rescuer had come!

CHAPTER XXIX.

TRICK FOR TRICK.

THROUGH the secret door two persons had entered the apartment—the housekeeper, and behind her came the young actor, Gordon Mallory.

A scream of joy escaped from the girl's lips when she beheld the handsome face of the young man; she understood that her peril was now at an end; but, as for the politician, his rage knew no bounds. Although as a rule self-possessed and rarely losing control of himself, yet on the present occasion, so surprised and enraged was he at the unexpected intrusion, that he flew into the most violent passion, growing almost scarlet in the face.

"Well, sir, what is the meaning of this?" he cried. "Who in blazes invited you to enter this house? Do you know where you are, you impudent puppy? This is my house, do you understand! and I am not in the habit of entertaining uninvited guests; so the quicker you get out the better. And you"—and he turned, fiercely, to the housekeeper—"what on earth do you mean by letting this rascal into the house?"

"It wasn't my fault; I couldn't help it," responded the woman, angrily, and looking daggers at the other as she spoke.

"Not your fault!" roared Clutterbuck, in a fearful rage—"the blazes it wasn't! You ought not to have let him in."

"How could I help myself?—how could I know that he was hiding outside the kitchen door?"

"Why didn't you call for assistance?" and as he spoke the major glared at the intruder in such a way as to infer that if she had called out he would have come and made it particularly warm for him.

"How could I call out when he put a knife at my throat and threatened to stab me if I uttered a word, and if you don't believe me just look at my throat. You can see with your own eyes where the skin is cut." And the woman pointed to her neck where, sure enough, there was quite an ugly scratch.

"The blame should rest on my shoulders, sir," Mallory remarked; "I must give this woman credit for doing her best to keep me out and to refuse me information after I got in."

"And now, sir, that you are in, you will oblige me by walking out!" the major cried, roughly.

"Certainly, sir, that is exactly what I am going to do," Mallory rejoined, very politely.

"Miss Bell, oblige me by putting on your things and we will depart."

"Oh, no, you will not!" the politician cried, hotly, his rage breaking out afresh. "You can get out yourself, and the quicker the better, but as for this lady she will remain here."

"No, I will not!" the girl exclaimed upon the instant. "I will not remain a single moment longer in this house than I can help. I have been the victim of a terrible plot, and this wretch here is to blame. Take me away at once, I implore you."

"You hear what the lady says; she does not desire to remain, and now will you have the kindness to unlock the door yonder—I presume under the circumstances that it is locked—so that we can depart by the front door? Although I made my entrance through the garden, yet it is not exactly the way for a lady to take."

"You scaled the wall and broke into my house like a robber and a thief as you are, you villain!"

"I always told you that you ought to have a couple of good dogs, and then they would have made mince-meat out of this fellow," snarled the woman.

"Dogs wouldn't have kept me out if you had a dozen!" Mallory assured. "And, as the matter is, you may thank your lucky stars that I have chosen to come quietly, all by myself, to settle this matter instead of calling upon the police authorities."

"Well, I really admire your impudence! Do you think the word of a man like yourself, a vagabond actor, would for a single instant have any weight against a gentleman of my station in society?" And the major swelled out like a turkey-cock.

"Give me no more of your airs and insolence!" cried the young actor, in a sudden outburst of passion, "or else I will be apt to forget the difference in our years, and taking you by the throat I will shake some of your impudence out of you!" And as he spoke, Mallory advanced in such a threatening way that, despite his assurance, the major retreated in considerable alarm.

"No violence, Gordon, for my sake!" the girl pleaded.

"Shall I call for the police?" cried the woman. The politician winced at the suggestion; he had no use for policemen under the present circumstances.

"Oh, yes, send for the police instantly," Gordon hastened to add. "You can give me in charge, you know, for daring to enter your house without your permission, and at the same time this lady can have you arrested on the charge of abduction—a State's Prison offense."

"That accusation is easily enough disposed of, young man!" the major rejoined, with a great deal of dignity. "I am ready to swear under oath that I had nothing to do with the lady's visit here. I did not bring her, nor did she even come by invitation of mine. She entered this house of her own free will, as this lady will testify," and he waved his fat hand, pompously, toward the housekeeper.

"It is as true as Gospel!" the woman declared.

"And yet, altogether, it is as false as false can be!" the actress cried. "I am the victim of a deep-laid and cunning plot. I was decoyed to this house and have been detained here as a prisoner against my will by this man, as I can force the scoundrel to admit."

"We are only wasting time in talking," Mallory observed. "You see, sir, that the lady does not wish to remain under your roof, and as for myself—"

"You can go to the devil!" cried the major, in a rage.

"I am very much obliged for your kind permission even if I do not avail myself of it, but I should really hesitate to trouble any of your friends even at your invitation; and now the key of the door, if you please."

"I will see you hanged first!" growled the baffled man.

"Well, we will descend by this secret stairway then, and I have no doubt that we will be able to find our way out."

"One moment!" cried the major, abruptly, turning to the girl, determined to try one last appeal: "before you go I should like to have the privilege of speaking a few words with you in private. You will not object to this, sir, I presume, if the lady wishes it?" and he turned to Mallory as he asked the question.

"No, sir; the lady's wishes are as law to me. If it is her pleasure for me to retire I will do so, on the instant."

"No, no!" cried the girl. "I do not wish you to leave me; I do not wish to have a private interview with this man. With my own free will I care not to speak a word to him, either in public or private. I am sure he is a basehearted, coarse-minded villain."

The contemptuous scorn so plainly apparent in both the girl's face and voice stung the politician to the quick, even more than her words.

"Very well! very well!" he remarked, endeavoring to appear indifferent. "If the lady has tired of my protection after a single night, well and good; I suppose I have no right to complain; women are notoriously fickle, but I am sure you will be sorry for it, Miss Helen. Just think over what I have said—the brilliant prospect I unfolded before you, and reflect upon the golden future which you are turning your back upon."

"Your words are useless, sir: I gave you my answer; I scorn, I hate, I despise you!"

"But, take time to consider—"

"Will you allow me," interrupted Mallory, "to observe, sir, that your detaining the lady in captivity here so that she may have time to think the matter over is a highly criminal act? If you had a grain of sense you would understand that you are taking the precise wrong way to achieve success, if you really wish to win her regard."

"Your advice was not asked!"

"Under the circumstances I tender it all the same, though, but if you are weary of my presence, as I have no doubt you are, by simply unlocking that door both myself and this lady will depart."

"Remember, Helen, it is your last chance!" the major exclaimed, utterly ignoring the young actor; "you will not get another as far as I am concerned. When you quit this house all is ended between us."

"You are an ignorant brute, sir, and all your wealth cannot cover up the grossness of your character. Unlock the door and allow me to depart!" cried the actress, in fiery indignation.

"Oh, you are a regular tragedy queen, but I will find a way to be avenged for all this," the politician retorted, scarlet with passion, and

then he drew the key from his pocket and throw it down upon the floor. "There's the key," he cried, "but I tell you what it is—I will find a way to make both of you repent the hour when you dared to brave me!"

"You infernal old villain! I've half a mind to hammer you within an inch of your life!" flamed out the young actor, all the manhood in his veins roused into action by the insulting words. "Pick up that key and hand it to me like a gentleman."

"No, hang me if I will!"

In a moment the strong hands of the actor clutched the politician by the throat; the housekeeper screamed for help, and the actress begged the angry man to desist.

The major "weakened," however, the instant he found himself in the steel like grasp of the other.

"For Heaven's sake don't choke me!" he begged, humbly. "Release me and I will pick up the key."

"Do so and on the instant!" the actor commanded, sternly. He removed his hands, and the major hastened to pick up the key, and gave it, although with great reluctance indeed, into Mallory's hand.

"And now, get out!" exclaimed the conqueror, threateningly.

CHAPTER XXX.

TURNING THE TABLES.

WITH a very ill grace, indeed, the major and the housekeeper, his willing tool, retreated through the secret door, and left the young actor in possession of the field.

Never had a rescuer come more opportunely, and never had the insolent man of money and "influence" been more thoroughly discomfited, and as he descended the secret stairs he swore in a manner which was really shocking.

Beaten and baffled he thirsted for vengeance, and he swore by all that was bad in this world that he would not rest until he had full measure of revenge, no matter how great the cost. Already his mind was at work, anxiously seeking a plan by means of which he might vent his hatred, and before he had reached the end of the short flight of stairs an idea had come into his mind which, if carried out in the proper manner, seemed likely to give him most sweet and ample revenge.

"It will do!" he cried, gleefully, much to the astonishment of the mystified and frightened woman, who had been forced, despite herself, to prove false to her trust, to reveal the secrets of the house, to conduct the assailant up the stairs, and thus at one fell swoop upset the fabric of her master's carefully-laid plans. She had not yielded until she had felt the very point of the steel actually scratching her throat, and firmly believed that her life would have been sacrificed by the desperate man in his blind fury if she had not consented to do as he wished—to lead him to the room occupied by the actress.

"Yes, yes, it will do!" the major repeated. "And it will be a terrible revenge, too, although it will cost me a deuced sight of money, but it will stab this proud and haughty hussy where she will feel the blow the keenest—in her reputation, and she will leave this house with such a stain upon her character that she will never dare to hold up her head again in the society of decent people. Even the women of uncertain character will point the finger of shame at her, for I will blazon her dishonor to all the world; as far abroad will it fly as the newspaper press on its mighty wings can carry it."

The housekeeper looked at her master in astonishment; he seemed to her to be raving, for never before had she seen him so terribly excited, but it was anger and not madness which ruled the hour.

"Quick! lock all the doors in the house and bring me the keys, so that it will be a difficult job for them to get out!" he commanded. "If I can only succeed in detaining them here a brief quarter of an hour, I shall triumph over the girl after all, though not exactly in the way that I intended, but since I cannot attain success, I will be content with vengeance!"

The woman hastened to obey the command, and in a very few minutes all the keys of the lower part of the house were in the politician's possession, and all means of escape by the doors were cut off; the windows were guarded by stout blinds, well secured on the inside with padlocks. The country house being only occupied by the major in the summer-time was now all shut up and prepared for the winter, and these extra fastenings were designed to prevent any felonious entry by evil-minded persons on plunder intent.

"Now if they get out of here inside of twenty minutes they will be smarter than I think they are!" the house-owner exclaimed, as he and his companion passed through the back door and he carefully locked it after them. "And in twenty minutes' time I will explode a mine beneath their feet, the result of which will make both of them curse the hour when they ran across my track."

Then, away through the garden and out upon the road in hot haste hurried the pair. No time was to be lost, for the two would be sure to endeavor to get out as soon as possible.

And while this had been transpiring downstairs the rescued and the rescuer had been exchanging confidences in the upper apartment.

Briefly the young actor explained how it was he happened to come so timely to her aid, and, as Helen suspected, Sara Pearl had been the instrument.

Mallory loved the young actress, although certain circumstances prevented him from pressing his suit; he loved the girl, whom he had helped to place upon the stage, and like all lovers he kept a jealous eye upon her.

The open and undisguised attentions of the old politician had not escaped his watchful eyes; hence when Helen's unaccountable disappearance was made known to him by Sara Pearl he suspected the major's interest in the matter, since common report made the politician more unscrupulous and regardless of consequences than he really was.

From the police officer in front of the opera-house Mallory had procured the most of his information, and learned of the politician's country house out on the pike, and such a house, shut up and isolated, Mallory naturally surmised would be the most likely place for the major to carry his prize if he had planned the abduction, for that the girl had been abducted the young actor had little doubt. So he set out for the retired mansion, taking the precaution to arm himself beforehand.

He found the house without difficulty, and scaling the back garden wall gained admittance to the grounds.

Cautiously he tried the back doors of the house, only to find them fastened. He had proceeded with extreme care for he had no doubt that the rascals desperate enough to carry off the girl, would not hesitate to fire at him, under the excuse that they supposed he was a midnight marauder.

Finding all the doors fastened, he camped down for the night in one of the numerous summer-houses which adorned the elaborately laid-out grounds.

In the morning he laid in ambush close to the kitchen-door, rightly thinking that if any one came from the house that would be the most likely portal for them to use. And he succeeded beyond his expectations, for, instead of a man, he had captured the housekeeper—with what success the reader has seen.

And while explanations were progressing, the actress was hurrying on her things, anxious to leave the place where she had passed through such an unpleasant experience. In a few moments she announced herself ready to depart.

"It is a long walk to the city," Mallory said, as he escorted her from the apartment. The means of egress were easy enough now, thanks to the key which he had compelled the major to surrender.

"I am so glad to escape from this dreadful place that I would face a ten-mile walk with gladness," she replied.

Mallory had not bargained with the old scoundrel for the key of the front-door, for, of course, he had supposed that it would be in the lock, and was astonished upon reaching the door to discover that the key was gone.

A suspicion that the struggle was not yet ended, flashed upon the young actor's mind, and when he came to examine the other doors which led from the mansion, and made the unwelcome discovery that every one of them was fastened against egress, he began to believe that mischief really was intended.

A hurried examination then disclosed the fact that all the windows were padlocked—showing, conclusively, that the design was to force them both to remain, for a while at least, in the house.

But Mallory, quick to act, announced that he would force off one of the window padlocks, but was not allowed to put his plan in operation, for, just as he was about to do so, the grating sound of a key being inserted in the lock of the front-door and turning in the wards fell upon his ears. Then the door swinging open, revealed the major, flanked on both sides by a stalwart policeman.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SURPRISING ACCUSATION.

IT WAS a tableau of astonishment; genuine on the part of the actor and actress and the two policemen, and well affected by the major.

Mallory could not, for the moment, comprehend what the scoundrel was up to—what he meant by calling upon the authority of the law in the shape of the two officers, for, of all men in the world, after his rascally exploit on the preceding night, he should have been the last person to introduce the guardians of the law.

A moment the parties stared at each other; then the major spoke:

"My information was correct then it seems; I have had the honor of visitors without knowing anything about it," he remarked—a speech which gave Mallory a clew to the situation, and the shrewdness of the dodge rather amused him, for not the least idea did he have that it would work.

One of the policemen thought it necessary to put in a remark at this point:

"Upon me worrud," he observed, with a fine rich "brogue" almost thick enough to be cut with a knife, "it's the bouldest thing that I iver heerd tell on, and I've been on the force for tin years."

"Mighty cheeky thing, young man," said the other, with a knowing shake of the head, addressing the remark to Mallory.

"What do you mean, sirs?" demanded the young actor, hotly.

"As a friend, I warn ye not to say too much or it may be used ag'inst ye," replied the Irishman.

"Yes, keep a still tongue in your head, you will find that it is always best in such cases as this in the long run," observed the other ornament to the "force."

"The proof of their guilt is clear and I make a charge against them; do your duty, officers!" exclaimed the major, sternly.

The two men advanced a step; Gordon drew back and assumed such a threatening attitude that the doughty policemen instantly drew their clubs, while the major chuckled. It would have done his heart good to have seen the young actor offer resistance and the two officers batter him with their "locusts" in presence of the woman before whom he had been humiliated.

The girl, however, who had looked upon this strange scene with wondering eyes, hastened to interfere.

"For my sake, Mr. Mallory, do not attempt to offer any resistance to these men; they are probably acting in the line of their duty, although evidently laboring under some mistake."

"Right ye are, miss! dooty, miss, that is phat we are afther doing all the time!" exclaimed the Irishman, ducking his head in a sort of a clumsy attempt at a bow, for, though a low, dull fellow he could not help being impressed by the beauty of the girl. "But not the last taste of a mistake is it; it is yeas that do be afther making a mistake, whin ye take this gintleman's house for a hotel, and do be making yerselves at home in it, widout taking the trouble to ask his lafe or license."

Gordon now understood the nature of the charge which was to be brought against them, and he smiled, contemptuously, as he thought how quickly such an outrageous accusation could be disposed of if the major was crazy enough to attempt to push it.

And for the first time, too, Helen understood what it all meant, and smiled, scornfully, when she reflected how easily she could sweep the accusation away when brought before the proper authorities, although she really did not believe that the politician would dare to go as far as that.

"Do I understand correctly?" Gordon asked; "has this man made a charge against me, and do you intend to take me into custody?"

"Both of yeas, young fellow; it's the pair of yeas that we are afther."

"I regret, miss, that I am obliged to put a lady in peril, but I must protect my property against depredation," the major observed.

The girl never took the slightest notice of the remark.

"We have a coach outside and we kin all go nice and quiet to the police-office and nobody be the wiser," the other officer remarked; "so if you will be so perlit as to come along with us we'll be obliged to you."

Five minutes after the whole party were in, or on the coach, and being driven rapidly to the police-office.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A REPUTATION BLASTED.

OF course the coach rolling through the streets attracted no particular attention, although a few people who were acquainted with the politician were somewhat astonished at beholding him perched up upon the box of the hack alongside of the driver.

At the police court the party were ushered into the presence of the presiding judge who had just taken his seat to proceed with the morning work.

The entrance of the party created a little ripple of excitement, for the major was about as well known as any man in the town, and the young actress, during her brief stay in Porkopolis, had managed to create quite a sensation, and therefore, when she and her male companion entered the court-room in the custody of officers, evidently as prisoners charged with some offense, and the major followed in the rear with the look of an accuser upon his face, expectation was upon tip-toe.

The officers conducted their prisoners to the prison-pen, where a herd of ragged, dirty, unsavory wretches were already gathered—the vile fish who had been scooped in by the police nets on the previous evening.

But, although a hot flush swept over the face of the young actor as he and his companion were placed in the same compartment with these wretched pariahs of society, the girl's natural dignity never deserted her, and she seemed totally oblivious of the disgusting nature of her surroundings, and when a miserable, bleary-eyed old man, still laboring under the influence of his last night's debauch, moved along on the rude bench so as to give her room, she thanked him as politely as though he had been the greatest gentleman in the land and she the poorest and humblest beggar.

The presiding judge betrayed considerable astonishment when this unexpected pair of culprits made their appearance, and looked curiously at the major as if to ask what it all meant. Upon entering the court the politician had nodded to the presiding official with the air of an old friend.

This judge, as the major well knew, was a disgrace to the court wherein he sat—a petty, contemptible partisan, who as a lawyer would not have been able to earn ten dollars a week, but, thanks to our peculiar system, which drags the judicial ermine through the mire of politics, his ascent to a judgeship had been easy.

And no man had a better hold on him than Major Clutterbuck, therefore, in deference to his "patron," he called the case at once.

A plain, straightforward story the politician told, and though both the accused knew full well how utterly false was the tale, yet they were really astonished at the air of truth which he contrived to impart to it.

He had a country-house out on the "pike," the major said, very sumptuously fitted and with a great many valuable articles in it. The house he had closed for the winter and it was unoccupied. During the previous week he had been warned by a certain party that he had better keep his eyes upon his property, as one of the actors attached to the opera house across the Rhine had said that it would be a deuced good joke to get into his—the major's—house, and raid the wine-cellar, it being a well-known fact that he had about the finest stock of wines of any man in the country. Of course he had not taken any particular notice of this, thinking that it was merely an idle joke, only he had made up his mind to warn the officer in charge of the district, and request him to keep a vigilant eye upon the premises. He had attended the performance at this same opera house where the young man was playing who had suggested the raid upon his wine-cellar, the previous night, and after the entertainment had been driven to his hotel. He had gone to bed, but at an early hour in the morning had been awakened by one of the hotel servants with the intelligence that a hackman desired to see him upon important business and must have an interview at once. He had granted the request and upon meeting the man was informed by him that he had driven a lady to a lonely house out on the pike, and after she had got out she had paid him and said she did not need his services any longer. At first he had not thought much about the matter, but as he drove off he noticed that the lady remained upon the stoop and did not attempt to enter the mansion; the place, too, was all closed up, not a gleam of light showing—looking as if it was totally deserted. As he had driven back to the city in the rain he had reflected upon the singular matter, and then it flashed upon him that he had

once heard that the house belonged to Major Clutterbuck, and that nobody ever lived there except in the summer time. Of course there might not be anything in it, but he thought it wouldn't be any harm to come and speak about the matter. The major then went on to say that his suspicions were excited, for the driver had informed him that he had taken the lady from the back door of the opera house across the Rhine, the same theater where the young man was employed who had thought it would be a good idea to raid his wine-cellar. He had proceeded instantly to ascertain if the raid had taken place, taking two officers with him, and the result was that, when the front door was opened, this man and woman were discovered in the hall, preparing to go out and evidently having passed the night there in company.

Boldly and broadly the major made this statement, and now for the first time both Mallory and the young actress understood the terrible nature of the revenge which the man had planned. He desired to blast the reputation of the girl forever, for, of course, all the details of the trial would be published, for your "local reporter" is a ghoulish who licks hungry lips at bare thoughts of such a feast as this would be.

The very walls seemed to swim before the outraged girl's glazed eyes; her lips were parched; the breath came hot and heavy, and if she did not swoon upon the instant it was because her firm, indomitable will was stronger than her weak nature, and kept her up.

As for the young actor, the veins upon his temple swelled out near to bursting as he comprehended the full force of the foul accusation. With great difficulty he restrained himself from springing up and denouncing the fiendish lie, but he knew that his turn would come next to tell the story, and that would put rather a different face upon the matter.

But the major wound up by saying that the hackman, who had driven the lady in the coach, was in court, and was prepared to testify, also, that the young man who had warned him that a raid was to be made upon his wine-cellar, would give his evidence.

Then came the hackman—the very same who had helped to play the shameful trick upon the girl; she recognized him in an instant—and he smacked his lips on the Bible, and swore to the outrageous lie as though it had been all gospel truth.

And the man who followed him the girl recognized immediately, also; it was the shabby-genteel fellow, who had waylaid them when she and Sara Pearl had emerged from the back door of the theater, and had requested the favor of a private interview with Sara, thus giving the hackman a chance to drive off with her without detection.

And this fellow swore as fluently to the conversation which he said had occurred between himself and the young actor, Gordon Mallory—he called him by name as if he had known him as well as a brother, although Mallory was certain that he had never set eyes on the rascal before. He described how they had met in the saloon, in the front of the theater, and how, casually, he had mentioned Major Clutterbuck's country-seat, and had remarked that he would like to be turned loose in the wine-cellar for a little while. The actor at once had manifested a great interest in the subject, and had questioned him closely regarding the mansion. He was well posted on the subject, for he had been employed for a time as the major's private secretary, and, at great length, he had explained to the other all about the house, never thinking that he wanted to know for any other reason than pure curiosity; but, upon recalling the conversation, and thinking the matter over, the impression had come to him that something more than mere curiosity was at the bottom of the matter, and he thought it was only right to go to the major and explain the whole affair, which he did.

By the time this fellow got through with his testimony, the actor began to see that, thanks to the unblushing manner in which the hackman and the other rascal had sworn to their story, the major had made out a pretty strong case, and against it he and Miss Bell had nothing but their bare word.

The instant the fellow left the stand the major was on his feet again.

"Your honor," he began, "I begin to think that I have been a little hasty in this matter, but I didn't rightfully understand the affair. I supposed of course that the design of the trespassers was to damage my property, but if I had supposed that, as it now appears, it was only a little love-affair and nothing more"—

and here the rascal beamed smilingly upon the unhappy couple who were angry enough to have strangled him where he stood, "why, I would not have called in the aid of the law, but, on the contrary, would have forgiven the trespass."

Here a very audible snicker went round the court-room, and even the grave face of his honor, the judge, showed traces of a smile, while the young actor grew scarlet with rage and the young girl white with shame.

"And so if you please, your honor," said the major, in conclusion, "I have no desire to press the complaint."

The judge bowed with becoming gravity; as, though he was, he yet perceived that there was something back of all this; but he wanted to stand well with the major, who was such a power in local politics, and he understood that, for reasons of his own, the politician wanted the matter dropped.

"Very well, just as you say; if you do not care to press the matter I will end the case right here," and then he turned to the prisoners. "You have got off very easily indeed; this gentleman might have made it very serious for you if he had chosen to push this thing; and the next time that you make a love appointment take my advice and don't break into a gentleman's house. You are discharged. Next case!"

But, Mallory was on his feet in an instant. He comprehended the major's game. He had given his side of the story; at one fell stroke he had blackened the girl's reputation, and by this clever disposal of the case had cut off all opportunity for them to tell their tale.

"Your honor, will you allow me to protest most respectfully against this disposal of the case? We deny this man's story, and these two witnesses who have testified are nothing but perjured liars which we will prove if we are allowed a chance."

"What more do you want, young man? You are discharged!" cried the judge, impatiently. "That is just the same as being declared innocent, isn't it? You are discharged, free to depart, sir. Your case in this court is ended. Come, bring up the next case!"

The court-officers hustled a poor, unfortunate wretch of a drunkard forward, and Mallory, perceiving that the fates were against them, drew the arm of the girl within his own, and they left the court-room—the temple of justice, so-called; but what a horrid mockery that appellation had been that day! They had found only the most shocking perversion of justice within its precincts!

They proceeded straight to the hotel, the girl more like a statue than a living woman.

Sara received them with open arms, but hardly had the young actress entered the room than she fainted dead away. The excitement had been too much even for her brave will.

Sara raised her in her strong arms and placed her upon the sofa, and while she was endeavoring to revive the fainting girl, Mallory related all that had taken place.

"Well, there is only one thing to be done now," Sara cried, with that determination which was so strong a part of her nature; "her character is utterly ruined, for this terrible affair will be in all the newspapers, sure, and the world is always ready enough to believe evil of an actress—only one thing to be done, sir, and that is for you to do. You must marry her!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NELL RICHMOND AGAIN.

THE face of the young actor became very grave, and Sara looked at him with an anxious expression upon her features.

"You need not hesitate about the matter, Gordon," she said; "I know that you love the girl, and Heaven knows she loves you, although she has never breathed a word in regard to that love to me, but I suspected it from the first;—in fact, I do not believe she ever admitted that such a passion existed even to herself, but the love is in her heart all the same; I know it is; and, Gordon Mallory, if you are the man I think you are, you will restore to this pure soul the good name that this evil-minded villain has contrived to tarnish. And, Gordon, she needs a protector, she is not fit for this life of ours. She is a beautiful girl, but she has not got the 'act' in her, and she will never make anything on the stage, despite her face, figure and voice, if she stays on the boards until she is gray. I felt sure of that, long ago, but I hated to say so. It is the truth, though; take her then, and with a man's strong arm guard her from the evils

which will be sure to follow close upon her footsteps if she keeps upon the stage."

The young actor's head had sunk down upon his breast, but now he raised it slowly, and looking Sara full in the eye made answer with a voice trembling with emotion:

"Sara, I believe you are right—I believe the girl does care for me; but, there is an obstacle between us—not one which will prevent us from being married, but which may rise up and try to separate us after we are married."

"Strike it down!" cried the actress, with an imperious gesture; "strike it down and put your foot upon it! That is the way to triumph over obstacles. If you can honestly marry this poor child—if you are free to wed her, do so in Heaven's name! Let the ceremony take place at once; everything can be easily arranged, if you will attend to it, and then a report of your marriage and a card signed by you, denouncing this rascal as a liar and a villain will appear in the very same newspapers, to-morrow morning, which will contain an account of the dreadful affair, so that the poison and the antidote will be taken together."

"I will, by Heaven! I will, despite all consequences, no matter what they may be!" he exclaimed.

With all the ardor born of a pure and fervent love the young man told his passion, and, as Sara had anticipated, at first Helen hesitated; she feared the offer was prompted by generosity, not love—that, in a noble spirit, Mallory wished to remove the stain the wily major had contrived to fix upon her fair fame.

Earnestly the young lover combated this idea, and he told the maid how he had fallen in love with her in the little New Jersey village, and had loved her ever since, his passion increasing with each new day.

At last she consented:—what maiden so coy as not to yield to love's soft summons, when the right man speaks?

And when Sara came back, she perceived that the young actor had told his "soft tale and was a thriving wooer."

Gordon acquainted her with the news, and with characteristic decision Miss Pearl declared that the sooner the union took place the better, and urged the necessity of haste with so much fervor that Helen was fain to consent.

The minister was sent for, and then, in the presence of Sara, and another witness only, the pair were married.

But hardly had the clerical gentleman departed, when, with a scornful, forbidding smile upon her features, Nell Richmond opened the door and came stalking into the room. Mallory sprung at once to his feet, his face white, and a threatening look in his eyes.

Helen looked up in amazement, but Sara understood that the obstacle of which the young actor had spoken had already arisen, and now she asked herself the question—would Mallory follow her advice, strike it down, put his foot upon and crush it, and if he attempted, would he be able to accomplish the feat?

Pausing before Helen, Nell Richmond made her a low courtesy, but it was plainly in mockery.

"If you please, miss, I have come after my husband," she said, in the most impudent manner possible.

"Your husband!" and Helen, starting to her feet, confronted the other like a tragedy queen.

"Yes, my husband, whom you have just had the pleasure of marrying—that man, Gordon Mallory!" and she shook her outstretched finger at that gentleman, but he did not quail in the least. He had at last made up his mind to adopt the course which he ought to have taken years ago; now he was about to follow Sara's advice, confront and beat down the evil spirit which had troubled him for so long.

The young actress turned her beautiful eyes upon her newly-made husband; she had perfect faith that he could explain matters.

"My husband!" repeated the woman, in the most spiteful manner possible; "let him deny it if he dares!"

"Well, I do dare," the young actor answered, calmly. "I am not your husband; you are not my wife; you have not the slightest legal claim on me and never had."

"Were you not married to me, married by a minister in Chicago just the same as you have been married to this woman to-day?"

"A marriage ceremony was performed between us; as a boy I was entrapped by you an old and artful woman of the world, but, hardly had the ceremony been performed when I was informed by a woman who was once your bosom friend, but with whom you had quarreled, that you had a husband in England, and she showed me a letter from him, in which he upbraided you for your cruel desertion, but

winding up by saying that he was glad that you were gone and that he hoped never to see you again."

"A lying forgery!" almost shrieked the woman; "you cannot produce that letter, and even if you could, you have no proof that it was true."

"Do you challenge me to the contest, then? Although I have not the letter the name signed to it is still fresh in my memory. The letter came from London, England. It will be easy enough to write to London and see if a man still resides in that city by the name of Jeremiah Kinlan."

"Hallo, hallo, who is that a-using my name so freely?" cried a voice, as a man pushed open the only partially closed door and came into the room.

With a cry of anger Nell Richmond clinched her hands together until the nails fairly cut into the flesh.

What strange accident had brought this man clear across the stormy ocean?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HADA AND HALAH.

BEHIND this first man came a second. The attentive reader will probably remember the two men who, in an early chapter of our tale, tracked the blacksmith to his last resting-place, and then, like baffled sleuth-hounds, nosed around the grave, eager to hit on a fresh trail—Archibald Posilwaite and Jeremiah Kinlan. And they had found a fresh trail, after a time—a trail which led them from the frozen North to the sunny South; but it was broken again by a second grave. This time, however, there was a well-defined clew left, so that they could follow their pursuit rapidly.

The recognition between the woman, Nell Richmond, and the man, Jeremiah Kinlan, was mutual.

The blood left her face, the fire her eyes, and she staggered back, astounded.

And he cried out, loudly:

"Why, Sal! If it ain't Sal, blow my buttons!"

Gordon Mallory was quick to improve the opportunity.

"This is your wife, Mr. Kinlan, I believe?" he said.

"Well, I don't want her, sir; I ain't making any claim to her; if any other fool has got his hooks onto her, he can just hold fast for all that I care," the man replied. "She cut her lucky and hooked it across the herring-pond a good many years ago, and I have enjoyed peace and comfort ever since, so I ain't saying anything if anybody else wants her."

"You brute! I wouldn't live with you again if you were made of diamonds!" and with an indignant face, and eyes flashing fire, Nell Richmond swept from the room, and no one therein ever saw her again.

"There's a catamaran for you!" the English detective muttered.

"I don't wonder you joined the force," the other one exclaimed. "A woman like that is enough to make any man desperate."

And, now that this disturbing element was gone, the two detectives, for both of them were famous Scotland Yard men, explained their business.

They sought a certain Halah Kunibell, daughter of Sabban and Rachel Kunibell.

With a smile the young actress acknowledged that that was her name.

And now, not to weary the patience of the reader, but to "come at once to Hecuba," as the dashing Miss Pearl would have said, we will not give the tiresome explanation of the detectives, each of whom was employed by a different lawyer, eager to find the heir and enjoy the fat pickings which would attend the care of the vast property left by old Ronald Kunibell, Halah's grandfather; a few words tell the strange story of the Kunibell family.

Ronald Kunibell, the father of Sabban, had risen by his own exertion from a poor man to the possession of one of the finest estates in the north of England. He was in the iron trade, and his vast works covered acres of ground. Like many another man who has risen from the ranks, this self-made iron-merchant was ten times as proud as though he had inherited his wealth. Sabban was his only son, and he had set his heart upon a marriage between him and the daughter of a rather decayed nobleman, who possessed an estate in the neighborhood, but the son had also a mind of his own, and, to his father's rage, he married a pretty, but penniless girl, the daughter of a small shop-keeper who dwelt in the village near by. This, of course, terribly enraged the father; a quarrel ensued between the two; as a result the son was driven

out into the world to seek his own fortune. Years passed on; two children were born to the son, but some sixteen years separated the two; and when the elder girl was about eighteen, she with all the willfulness which her father had displayed, chose to fall in love with an American tourist, who chanced to be passing some time in the neighborhood, despite her father's urgent commands never to dare to speak to him, for her sire had, in some unaccountable manner, taken a great dislike to the American.

But, the willfulness was in the blood, and the girl one night fled from home, married the American, and journeyed with him to his home across the sea.

The angry father discarded his erring daughter as thoroughly and utterly as his father, years before, had discarded him. The name of the disobedient girl was never spoken again in that household. And, as misfortunes never come singly, just about that time a strange fit seized upon old Kunibell; if he had been a poor man people would have called him mad, and shut him up in a lunatic asylum, but, as he was so rich, the world said he was "eccentric," and he did as he liked. The peculiar form of his madness lay in a most violent hatred to his son, and with almost diabolical cunning he contrived all sorts of devices to annoy him, until at last the persecution became so great that the son was obliged to fly with his family and household goods; he put the sea between him and his mad parent, but, even when buried, as it were, in the little country hamlet, he feared lest the madman should seek him out; and this was the secret of Kunibell.

But, just before the blacksmith died, the great iron merchant passed away. In his last moments sanity returned, and he strove to repair his cruel injustice by leaving all his vast property to the son whose life he had embittered. The agents, though, who came across the sea, found that the son had only survived his father by a few days, and then they set out to find the daughter, Hada. But, to get upon her track, they had to seek back again to England. There they discovered the name of the tourist who had won the girl; and in the new world they easily ran him down; but he was dead, too, and his widow, the hapless Hada, a madwoman; the insanity was in the family, and would come out at times. Mrs. Thomas Beaufort Oglethorpe, she was, her husband the only son of the late Judge Oglethorpe, a descendant of one of the oldest Southern families. The judge's widow was still living, and being devotedly attached to the unfortunate Hada, fitted up a suit of apartments in her mansion, and employed suitable attendants to care for her.

And it was this unfortunate being, apparently perfectly sane at times, who had played such strange tricks as related in the first part of our story.

Shortly after her capture by the Professor and his assistants, just as they reached the old family mansion in the South, Hada suddenly sickened, and, despite all that care and money could do, died.

The detectives reached the place just after the funeral; and now, since the elder sister was dead, they turned their attention to the younger one, and upon questioning the Professor he suddenly remembered the young actress and the likeness which there was between her and Mrs. Oglethorpe. The strange interest which the madwoman had taken in her, too, was now plain to the Professor. The young actress was the sister.

And this clew the detectives followed up with happy results. Grand good news they brought to the young girl; she was one of the richest heiresses in England, and her brave struggle against poverty was at an end.

"Well, Mr. Gordon Mallory, you can just thank me for your good luck!" the outspoken Sara exclaimed, after congratulations were over. "If it hadn't been for my advice you would never have dared to open your mouth to ask for your wife, and by the same token, Mrs. Mallory, you can thank me for him."

"I will try and repay the service by getting you a good husband, dear," the young girl replied, archly.

"Thank you; but when my time comes I will know it quick enough."

Our story is told; the career of the actress is over; the reality had made the dream pass away, and she no longer hungered for the empty glories of the stage.

The moral is plain:—no matter how great the ambition, the laurel crown of the actress is hard to gain, and half the time when it is won it is not worth the winning.

THE END.

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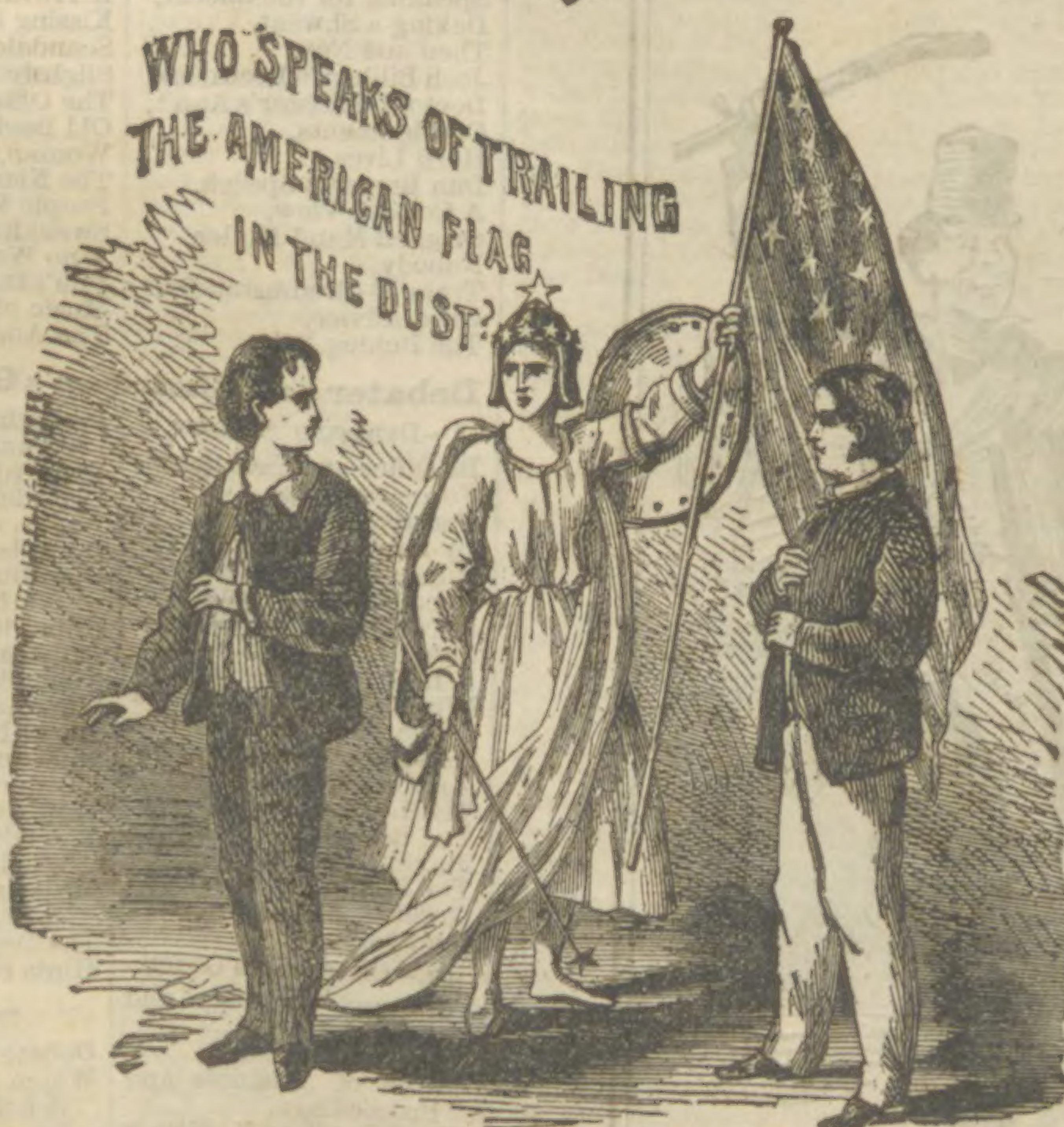
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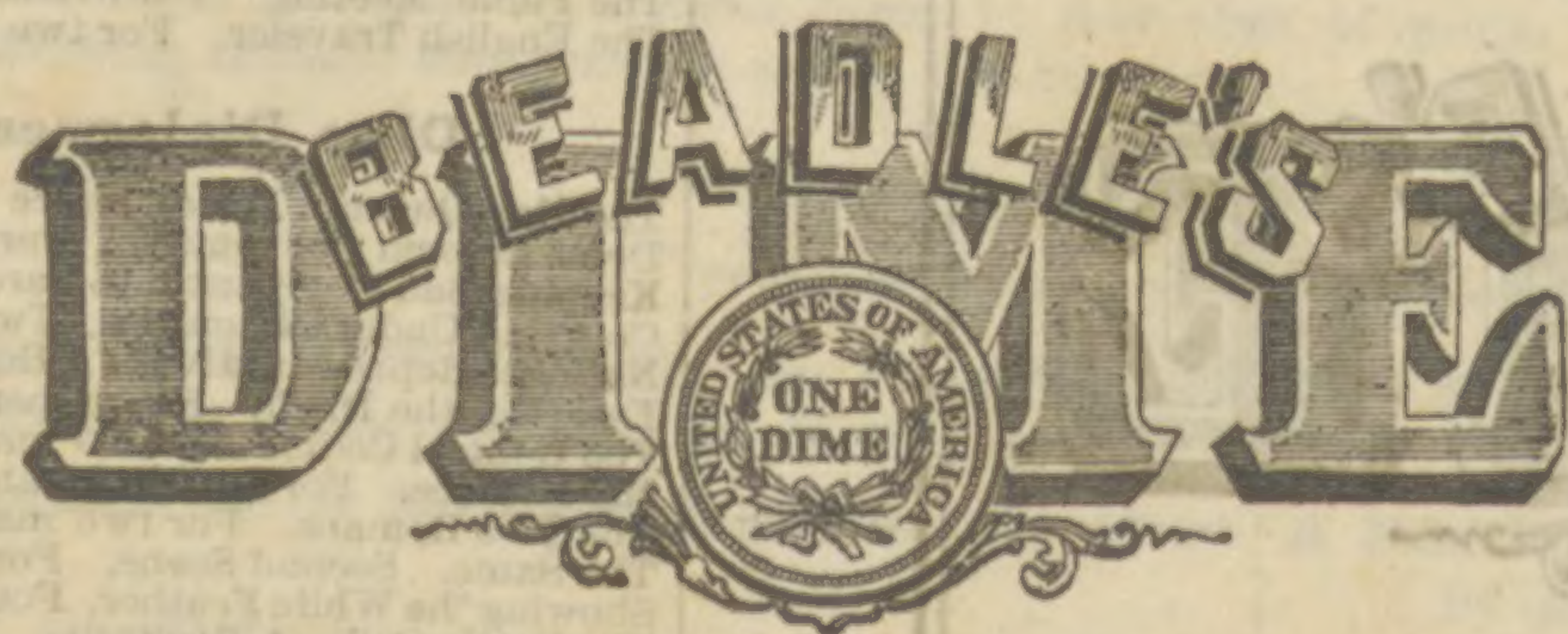
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